NORTH of 36

EMERSON HOUGH

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A Paramount Picture *North of 36.*

LOIS WILSON AS TAISIE LOCKHART.

NORTH OF 36

BY

EMERSON HOUGH

AUTHOR OF

THE COVERED WAGON,
54-40 OR FIGHT, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY
A PARAMOUNT PICTURE

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NORTH OF 36

CHAPTER I

IN THE MORNING

"MEN——" Taisie meant to say "Good morning, men," as usually she did if she came to the cook house door before they had finished breakfast. But this morning she hesitated, halted.

There had been the usual mealtime silence of the cattle hands, broken only by rasp or chatter of steel on tin; but as the tall girl's shadow fell at the door of the log house Jim Nabours, foreman of Del Sol, rose at his place. Fifteen other men pushed back their chairs nervously, staring at the boss as though caught in some overt criminal act. In the occupation of eating a regulation breakfast of beef and beans, cattle hands, time out of mind, have asked no aid and invited no company.

But Taisie Lockhart was their hereditary chieftainess. Her father, Colonel Burleson Lockhart, these two years deceased—a strong man in his day, and a poignant—had owned the Laguna del Sol range, of unknown acreage. Likewise, he had owned no man knew how many thousand head of long-horned cattle, from calves to mossy horns; owned yonder branching and rambling building of log and adobe called the big house; owned

the round pens and the live-oak groves, the mast-fed range hogs and the nuts that fed them; owned bunk houses and cook house and corrals. Yes, and owned faith of body and soul of every man that lived on Del Sol, from old Salazar to the gawkiest ranch boy to put his saddle under the shed.

Heiress to all this, as her father had owned lands and herds and men, so did Taisie Lockhart. But to her, orphaned and alone, came an added fealty from her men that amounted almost to fanaticism. Most of them had known and loved her from her childhood. In her young womanhood they enshrined her.

The boss of Laguna del Sol now stood framed in the doorway, in man's garb of shirt and trousers—an assumption shocking in that land and day. This costume she deliberately had assumed when she took on a man's duties in a business preëminently masculine. Obviously now, she was tall, slender, supple, rounded to a full physical inheritance of womanly charm unhardened by years of life in the saddle and under the sun. More; she was an actual beauty. Anywhere else she would have been a sensation. Here, she spoiled each unfinished breakfast.

Against the morning light the freckles of Anastasie Lockhart could not be seen. No matter. Every man of these could have told you the number and contour of them each and all. In a way, too, they could have told you that her freckles went with her hair. The light that shone through the mass of dark red hair—long and unconfined she wore it, clubbed between her shoulders with a shoestring—lighted a thousand fronds into a sort of aureole, halo, crown. Not that this, either, was

needed. For long, Taisie Lockhart, orphan owner of Laguna del Sol—just south of Stephen Austin's first settlement in old Texas it lay—had been traditional saint, angel, to every creature that bore boots and spurs within a hundred miles. Nay, more than that; across two states—old Texas and old Louisiana—so far as interchange of information then went, before the day of telegraph and rails, men, and even women, spoke in hushed tones of Taisie Lockhart; the former out of awe at her beauty, the latter out of pity for her fate.

An orphan, left alone at twenty, just as she came home from her convent schooling at the ancient city of New Orleans, with no woman relative and no female companions other than her servants, what could be the fate of such a girl, seventy-five miles from the nearest town, twenty-five from the nearest rancho, and the rumor of her beauty continually spreading league by league? On her shoulders rested all the responsibilities of what was or had been one of the largest and richest ranches of Central Texas, and thereto was the responsibility for what manner of beauty sets mad the hearts of men.

Every woman in all Texas, at least in all the Texas of Bexar, Guadalupe, Comal, Gonzales and Caldwell counties, was sorry for Taisie Lockhart. She was trying to hold together the property left her by the sudden death—through murder—of her father, Burleson Lockhart, frontiersman on the bloody borders of the Southwest since 1831. And every woman wondered what man she would marry. Every woman also demanded that she marry soon.

An Alabama man Burleson Lockhart's father had

been; he himself was Louisianian up to his young manhood; and since then Texan, from a time before the Texas Republic was born. Add to Burleson Lockhart's six feet of fighting manhood the tender beauty of Anastasie Brousseau, gentle and beautiful Louisiana girl, willing to leave her own plantation home among the moss-hung bayou lands for the red borders of Comanche land—and behold Taisie, present mistress of Del Sol, motherless since six, educated by her father in compliance with her mother's steady wish, and now owner of a vast property that to-day would mean many millions.

But to-day in Texas is not the day of 1867. Yonder was a country wild, almost lawless, unfettered, savage; moreover just then roughened and wholly disheartened by the Civil War. In truth, taking her as she stood, within half a foot of six feet, beautiful despite her boots and trousers, Taisie Lockhart was no more than a dead-broke heiress to a potential but wholly dormant wealth, or to possessions which but now had vanished.

And that was why she now broke down in her morning salutation, even when all her men arose and joined Jim Nabours in silent attention.

"Men——" began the tall girl once more, and once more failed.

Then Taisie Lockhart ignominiously leaned her red head on her brown hand against the gray cook house door jamb and shed genuine feminine tears. Which act made every man present wish that he could do violence to something or somebody.

The boss was crying! Well, why? Had anything—had anybody—— The eye of each looked to his wall

nail, where, in ranch etiquette, he had hung his gun before taking up his knife and fork.

Jim Nabours cleared his throat. His Adam's apple struggled convulsively, walking up and down his brown and sinewy neck. Taisie knew he wanted to speak.

"Men," she began yet again, at last desperately facing them with undried eyes, and stepping fully into the long room, "I've come to say good-by to you. I've—we've—you've got to go!"

The men stood, shocked. What could she mean? Go? Where? What? Quit the brand? Leave Laguna del Sol? Leave her, the boss? What did that mean? Not even Jim Nabours could break the horrified silence, and he had been foreman these five and twenty years.

"Boys," said Taisie Lockhart at last, suddenly spreading out her hands, "I'm done! I'm broke! I—I can't pay you any more!"

And then Taisie Lockhart, owner of perhaps fifty thousand acres of land and what had once been fifty thousand cows, broke down absolutely. She cast herself on the board bench at one side of the clothless table, sunk her glorious head on her flung arms and wept; wept like a child in need of comfort. And there was none in all the world to comfort her, unless sixteen lean and gawky cow hands could do so; which, now patently, they could not.

"Miss Taisie, what you mean?" began Jim Nabours, after a very long time.

"Broke!" whispered Anastasie Lockhart collegiately. "Broke at last! Boys, I'm clean busted and for fair!"

"That ain't no ways what I mean, Miss Taisie!" went on the anguished foreman. "Broke ain't nothing. Yore

paw was broke; everybody in all Texas is and always has been. Pay? He didn't; nobody does. But what I—now, what I mean is, what do you mean when you say we got to go? What have we done? What you got against us?"

"Nothing, Jim."

"Why, good Lord! There ain't a man here that wouldn't—that wouldn't—indeed, ma'am, there ain't, not one of us that wouldn't— So now then, you say we got to go? Why? You'd ought to tell us why, anyways, ma'am. That's only fair."

The girl's somber eyes looked full into his as she raised her head, one clenched hand still on the table top, the quirt loop still around the wrist. She faced business disaster with the courage many a business man has lacked.

"That's what makes me cry," said she simply. "It's because you won't go easy when I tell you. It's because you'll be wanting to keep on working for me for nothing. I can't stand that. If I can hire you I've got to pay you. When I can't, I'm done. Well, I can't any more. I'd sell my piano for this month's pay. I've tried to, but I can't."

"What? You'd sell the Del Sol pianny? Why, Miss Taisie, what you mean? I helped freight her up here from Galveston. That's the onliest pianny in Middle Texas, far's I know. That's branded T. L., that pianny! And you'd sell her to pay a lot of measly cow hands wages they didn't no ways ever half earn? Why, ma'am!"

Again sundry evolutions of the Adam's apple of Mr. Nabours.

"Oh, I don't doubt you'd stay on, because you've all worked around here so long. You'd all be careless about your wages; you'd do anything for me, yes. That's because you think I'm a girl. You think you have to. I'm not—you don't. I'm a business man, like any one else. If I can't make Del Sol pay I've got to give it up; that's all.

"I'm four months behind now," she added, "and not one of you has whimpered. The store's naked and you know it. Some of you even may be out of tobacco, but you don't complain. That's what cuts me. You're the finest bunch of hands that ever crossed leather, and I can't pay you. All right! If I can't, you can't work for me."

"But, Miss Taisie, ma'am," struggled her foreman, " 'tain't nothing a-tall. What's a few pesos one way or other? We can't buy nothing, nohow, even if we had money, and don't want to, noways.

"Besides, what'd become of us? Besides, what'd become of you? Have you ever thought of that? Didn't I promise yore paw, and yore maw, too, that I'd look after you and yore interests long as we was both alive? Well, then?

"I ain't got much savvy outside of cows, ma'am," he went on; "but cows I do know well as the next. It's all cows, this part of Texas, and we all know it. There ain't no market and never will be. We can't sell cows at six bits a head, or a hide, neither, and we all know that—everybody's got cows that ain't worth a damn, ma'am, of course. But what I mean is, if the T. L. can't make a living there ain't no ranch in Texas can. I don't put my hands back of no outfit in the world,

ma'am. We've run the T. L. on over twelve hundred head of loose stuff this winter, and I told the boys to pick the yearlings and twos careful."

His eyes shifted, he perspired.

"We got plenty of water and all outdoors. We didn't lose one per cent last summer, and winters was when we didn't lose nothing. The increase is a crime, ma'am. If we'd hold a rodeo in our band—which we'd ought to—God knows how many we'd find in the T. L. I'd bet sixty-five thousand! And the mesquite full of long ears that no man claims. If we can't do well no stockman in Texas can."

His eyes avoided hers as he gave these Homerically mendacious figures. But he went on stoutly:

"Yet you talk of quitting! Why should you? The old Laguna is the richest range in Texas. Our grass sets 'em out a hundred and fifty a head heavier than them damned coasters from below, ma'am.

"And if you talk of turning off us men, where'd we go? What'd we do? I ask you that, anyways, ma'am."

"If there was any market," began Taisie, "it would be different. As it is, the more we brand the poorer we get."

"Well, all right; we ain't any poorer than our neighbors. Market? Of course there ain't no market! Rockport has failed—canning cows don't pay. Hides is low. There's nothing in the steamship trade, and no use driving East since the war is over. Besides, with such good water and range as we got on Del Sol, why, nothing ever dies; so there ain't no hides no more.

"As for long ears, slicks, we're as good off as old Sam Maverick, that wouldn't never bother to brand nothing

hardly, and so found hisself swamped when the war was over. We got less unworked long-ear range west of us than anybody, but nobody tries to sell hides or cows now. The New Orleans market costs more to get a cow to than the cow comes to when he's there. The steamships has us choked off of everything east of us; we can't ship nothing and break even on it. Every one of us knows that, of course."

"Too many cows!" Taisie's head shook from side to side.

"Yes! Enduring the war, cows just growed like flies in here and all over Texas. Market? No, that's so. But when you once get to raising cows, ma'am, and branding cows that no one else has raised, and seeing the herds roll up and roll up—why, it's no use! No cattleman can do no different. If we had a market—why, yes. We hain't, and ain't going to have; but what's the use crying over that? Shall every stockman in Texas lay down and quit cows just because he can't sell cows and ain't got no market? If he does the state might as well quit being a state. It might as well, anyhow, since the damn Yankees taken it over to run since the war."

The shadow of Reconstruction was on Jim Nabours' face. And what he said covered the whole story of the general destitution of an unmeasured empire tenanted by uncounted millions of Nature's tribute to life when left alone. This was Texas after the Civil War, impoverished amid such bounty of wild Nature as no other part of this great republic ever has known. The first Saxon owner of Laguna del Sol paid for some of it in Texas land scrip that had not cost him two and a half

cents an acre. His original land grant had cost him less. Scrip went in blocks and bales, held worthless. Men laughed at those who owned it. Land? It could never fail. The world was wide; the sun was kind; life was an easy, indolent, certain thing.

Nothing less than a section of land was covered by scrip. It was nothing to own a thousand sections, if one liked to fad it. And, since a hundred thousand cattle might roam there unmolested and uncounted, it literally was true that every man in Texas was land poor and cow poor—if he was so ignorant and foolish as to buy land scrip at two to five cents an acre when he might have all the range he liked for nothing at all, and all the cows he cared for without the bother of counting them.

It was genesis. It was still in the beginning, in the Texas of 1867, where the Americans had just begun to extend the thin antennæ of the Saxon civilization. Here was a life for a bold man, rude, careless, free, independent of law and government. A world unbounded, inestimable, lay in the making.

But any who could have read fully this little drama at the cook house would have known that world to be tenanted by folk embittered by the war and ready to say that their world now was made and done. Of these, Taisie Lockhart, orphan loaded with riches that could not be rendered portable or divisible, made one more unhappy unit. She was, naturally, far the more unhappy because through her education she had found a wider outlook on life and the world than had these others. Somewhere, too, in her stern ancestry had been

a sense of personal honor which left her still more sensitive.

But the immortal gods take pity on the sorrows of youth and beauty, it may chance. They have their own ways, employ agents of their own selecting. This orphan heiress, keen to pay her debts, became one of the first factors in one of the most Homeric epochs in the history of all the world. Not so long after this woebegone meeting of bankrupt cattle folk at the Del Sol cook house there was to appear a phenomenon that set at naught all customs, that asked no precedent, that defied even the ancient laws of section and of latitude. All of which did not just now develop.

"Set down, Miss Taisie," said the gray old foreman, awkwardly, gently, flushing at asking the owner of Del Sol to be seated in her own cook house. She had arisen, and, hands at her eyes, was about to leave the place. Now she dropped back and looked at him dumbly, suddenly no more than a weak girl at her wits' end.

"Now listen to me, Miss Taisie," began old Jim Nabours with sudden firmness. "You know I've worked for yore folks all my life, ever since I come down from the Brazos forty years ago. I come back here when the war stopped—Kirby Smith's men on the Lower Red was the last to surrender. This is my place, that's all.

"Now, I got a right to talk plain to you. I'm a-going to. When you say you're going to turn off a bunch of the best cow hands in Texas, just because you can't pay their wages no more, why, then you ain't showing reason ner judgment. I'm foreman for the T. L. brand. What I say goes. When you say we're turned loose

you're talking foolish. We ain't! What's wages to us? I'd like for you to tell me. Did we get any in the Army? Does anybody pay wages now, in all Texas? How can they?

"Miss Taisie, I went with yore paw to Austin, when he was a member, and in the big Assembly Room was a man at a desk with a hammer, and says he, ever oncet in a while, 'Motion done overruled!' Then he soaks the table with the hammer. And now, ma'am, yore motion about firing sixteen good cow hands is done overruled!"

Jim Nabours' great fist fell with the force of a gavel on the breakfast table, till the tin plates rattled under their two-tined forks and the nicked cups brought added antiphony. Frowning, he looked savagely at the young woman. He was no better than her peon for life, for her father had given her to his care. She was the very apple of his eye.

"But what are we going to do, Jim?" Taisie's tears now were less open and unashamed.

"What makes you ask that of me, ma'am? I ain't got that fur along yet. I don't know what we're going to do. But I do know, for first, we ain't going to quit. Fire us? Why, good God!"

The grizzled beard of Jim Nabours to some extent concealed the Adam's apple, now again on its travels. There was not a man in the embarrassed group who did not wish himself in the chaparral precisely then, but every man of them nodded in assent. Of them all only old Sanchez, thin, brown and wrinkled, spoke at first—an old, old Mexican, born on Del Sol under its second transfer from the crown of Spain.

"Si, señorita," said he. *"Es verdad!"*

"Shore it's the truth!" broke out a freckled youth of seventeen, the soft beard just showing on his cheeks. But then, as he later confessed, he plumb bogged down. And the youngest of them all—Cinquo Centavas, they called him, since he had but five copper pennies when he rode in, twelve years of age; he was now fourteen—stood with his blue eyes wet with tears, unashamed in his rags.

"Give me time to think, men!" said Anastasie Lockhart, immeasurably touched by all this. "Let me see. Wait—I don't know!"

She rose and went to the door, framed once more gloriously against the sun; and sixteen pairs of eyes of silent men went with her.

A sudden baying of the ranch pack of foxhounds arose. It was not directed toward her. The dogs were streaming toward the pole gate of the yard fence. A rider was coming in.

CHAPTER II

A NEW WORLD

IT WAS not the custom of the young mistress of Del Sol to ride out to meet strangers at her gate. She received callers in her own rude office or her almost ruder parlor. To meet any caller on this morning was distasteful to her every thought. She gave the incomer only a glance as she walked to her horse, which stood, head drooping, anchored by the long bridle reins thrown down.

A peculiar animal, Taisie's favorite mount, so marked as to be distinguished anywhere. No doubt descended from Blanco, the great white wild horse whose menada ran on the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos, Blancocito's dam must have been a buckskin, for he himself was a dark claybank, with the coveted black stripe along his back. But Blanco—said by some range men to be not many removes from Arabian, though of unknown origin—had given his son a white face, four white stockings and a singular harnesslike stripe of clean white, four inches wide, across both hips, running down almost to the white stockings of the hind legs. He could be told a mile away. It would have been of no use to steal him, and his shoulder brand was but perfunctory. Jim Nabours and most of the hands scoffed at any pinto, and selected solid colors—any color so only it was not black; but Blancocito put all their horsely

wisdom to shame. He never tired and never quit. No trail was too long for him. Gentled when a three, he never wholly had surrendered even to Taisie or the best of Taisie's top riders his inalienable Texas right to life, liberty and the pursuit of pitching, though these tendencies he usually held in abeyance in the case of his mistress. When he liked, he could be "mean to set," according to some others.

Just now Blancocito bit at the arm of his rider as she flung the reins over his neck and facing back, got foot in the stirrup and right hand on the horn of the cow saddle, true vaquero fashion. As she swung up to the seat his forefeet left the ground.

"Quit it!" said Taisie to him, and slapped his neck.

Then Blancocito bit at the tapaderos—gently, for he meant no harm; pitched just a little, with no malice in his heart; and so settled down to the springiest jog trot of any and all the horses in the T. L. brand; a gait which he could keep all day, and did keep now for two or three hundred yards, till his rider swung out of saddle at her own door and threw down the reins again.

Distrait as she was, Taisie Lockhart had not failed to note from the corner of an eye the young man who had entered the gate. He had hesitated an instant before choosing the cook house as his objective. She let him take the cook house, though with a swift doubt that he would stay there.

A tall man he was, perhaps twenty-five, perhaps thirty; slender, brown, with dark hair a trifle long, as so many men of that land then wore their hair. His face, contrary to the custom of the country, was smooth shaven, save for a narrow dark mustache. His eyes,

could Taisie have seen them, were blue-gray, singularly keen and straight, his mouth keen and straight, unsmiling. He left the impression of a nature hard, cold; or at least much self-contained.

These last details the mistress of Del Sol could not at the time note, but she was schooled to catch the brand of his horse, the fashion of his equipment. His saddle was deeply embossed, not lacking silver, and the light and thin ear bridle, above the heavy hand-wrought bit, was decorated along the cheek straps with tapering rows of silver conchas polished to mirror brightness. The long reins he held high and light, and rode as though he did not know that he was riding, his close-booted feet light in the tapaderos. His horse, a silver-tail sorrel, was a trifle jaded. If so, at early morning, the coat rolled at the cantle most likely must have been his blanket the night preceding; for it was far from Laguna del Sol to the next open door of the range.

None of these matters escaped Taisie Lockhart, used to reading and remembering men, cows and horses at a glance. Her range education had taught her much, but it was rather instinct told her that this man was neither fop nor plain cow hand. He had an air about him, a way with him, an eye in his head thereto; for Taisie knew that, even as she had made inventory of him, he had done as much or more with her, though he did not salute as he jogged off to the door near which the ranch hands now were standing. In sooth, Taisie had forgotten for the time that, garbed as she was, she looked like some long-limbed foppish boy who wore his hair long down his shoulders.

"Light, stranger!" Nabours gave the arrival the

usual greeting of the land. A dozen pairs of eyes gave him appraisal of the range. But the etiquette of the range was custom with this visitor. Though he was forced to wheel his horse quite about to do so, he dismounted on the same side of his horse as that which his hosts held, and not upon the opposite, or hostile, side. Moreover, he unbuckled his revolver belt and hung it over the horn of his saddle before entering the door. So! He had good manners. He was welcome.

"How, friends?" he said briefly, in return to the greeting. "McMasters is my name. I'm from Gonzales."

Nabours nodded.

"I know you," said he. "You're the new sher'f down there."

He was asked no questions. Some of the men already were saddling. The young horse wrangler was shaking up the remuda in the round pen, men were roping their mounts. Jim Nabours, foreman, and responsible for hospitality, no more than moved a hand of invitation. The newcomer seated himself at the long table, just abandoned. The negro cook appeared, bearing renewals. The guest ate in silence. Had Taisie seen him she would have noted some indefinable difference in his table manners from those of the cattle hands who but now had left this same rude board; but he ate with no shrug of criticism.

Nabours awaited his pleasure. Silence was the custom. There were some silent moments before the stranger pushed back and turned.

"I had to lie out last night at the river," said he.

"Fresh javelina isn't bad if you like it. I rather prefer your bacon here."

Nabours grinned.

"You'd orto have rid on in."

"The trail has changed since I was here. Of course, I used to know Del Sol. My father, Calvin McMasters—you've heard of him?—was a friend of Colonel Burleson Lockhart forty years back. They died together, and in the same way—you know how. But I was away three years with my regiment, and lately I've never got around to ride up the hundred miles from the south."

"You're riding back from north now?"

"Yes."

"Far?"

"From Arkansas."

"So?"

"Yes. I came down the Washita and crossed the Red at the Station, in from the Nations."

"How's that country up in there for cows?" asked Jim Nabours, with the cowman's invariable interest in new lands. "I never been acrost the Red. Palo Pinto's about the limit I make for hunting our cows on the north."

"Good range all the way through the Nations; good all the way from here across the Red and clean up to what they call the Kansas line—that's above the Cherokee Outlet. I was in east, along the Arkansas line."

"Water?"

"Plenty."

Nabours remained silent for a time.

"Tell me, friend," said he at length. "How about

Colonel Lockhart's old notion? He worked some cows north, like, on the Jess Chisholm Trail, up along the Washita, north of the Red somewheres. Arkansaw was where he went, and the last time he went he didn't never come back."

The faces of both men were grave. The murder of Burleson Lockhart and Calvin McMasters by the ruffians of the Arkansas border was an open wound for all Central Texas.

"The Chisholm Trail isn't any trail," said the stranger. "I came down that way myself, west of Wichita, but Jesse never did herd anything much over it. He did drive two-three little bunches from the Red River to Little Rock, Arkansas, not over a thousand head in all; but like as not he got the idea from my father and Colonel Lockhart. They both always said that Texas would have to find a market north.

"You see, they all had the good old Texas idea about starting a beef cannery to market our surplus cows. Some folks called Fowlers started to pack at Little Rock. Their meat all spoiled and it broke the whole outfit. Jess Chisholm didn't drive to Little Rock again. And you know my father and Burleson Lockhart paid their lives for their experiment. They wanted to do something for Texas."

"Several men has tried driving cows into Arkansaw, even Illinois, even Missoury and Ioway," commented the foreman of Del Sol. "Bad stories comes down—herds stole by bushwhackers and desperadoes, drovers robbed, stripped, tied up and whipped, drove out of the country, sent home broke or else left dead like them two good men. It's bad along the Arkansaw and Missoury

border. Plenty others has been killed up there. Bad business. Us Texans ought to even up a lot of things."

"Yes!" A sudden strange flash came into the gray eye of the young stranger. "I ought to know!"

Nabours' own keen eye narrowed.

"It's not safe to drive that way? Don't you think that's all foolishness?"

"It has been, so far."

"But then, men has done told me that Chisholm had a right good road, grass and water, clean north."

"No, he didn't do much. He only had an idea that's old in Texas—a beef market."

"If Texas had a market for her beef! Eh? We'd all be rich."

Nabours tried to remain calm. The thought was by no means new to him or to many other Texans, broad-minded and farseeing men like those two early martyrs of the trail.

"Well, Jesse only followed the road that crossed the Canadian at Roberts' Ferry—the old Whisky Trail. He headed west instead of north, after a while. He went up the Brazos and west across to the Concho with a bunch of cows. He knew there was a military market at Fort Sumner, on the Pecos, over in New Mexico. So he made the big two-day dry drive west of the Concho. He hit the Pecos at the Horsehead Crossing and worked up to Sumner. Loving and Goodnight had a trail north of Sumner—clean up into Colorado. Army posts and reservations all have got to have beef, and a lot of it. Yes, that's going to make a market some day. If we herd the Indians they've all got to eat."

"*Seguro!* Shore they have! They feed the damned

Comanches, and the Comanches shoot up and murder every outfit that tracks west to the Pecos—every drive out there means a half dozen Indian fights. No money in that.

"No, nor no money in anything that has anything to do with cows," Nabours continued. "Look at the reecord. Rockport, Indianola, Galveston, Mobile, New Orleans, Little Rock, Illinois, Ioway—all them foreign countries, full of damn Yankees and thieves. What ghostly chance has a Texas stockman got? I'd as soon eat javelin' as beef—it ain't so common, and it costs more. There's cows thicker'n lizards all the way from Matagorda to Doan's Store on the Red, and west far's the Staked Plains. We're busted, friend. The South is licked. We've got a carpet-bag government and no hope of any change. If all Texas was worth one solitary whoop in hell do you reckon you could buy a mile square of vine-mesquite grass land for fourteen dollars? Not that I would, or could—I haven't got the fourteen dollars. No, nor it don't look like any stockman in this whole state ever will have fourteen dollars, the whole caboodle, from Santone to the Sabine. This is the poorest place in the whole damned world, Texas is, and I'm here for to prove it."

Jim Nabours' long-pent dissatisfaction had led him into the longest speech of his entire life. He knew he had an understanding hearer in this grave young man from Gonzales, who nodded, noncommittal as heretofore. Nabours went on.

"And yet," said he vehemently, "why, now, Miss Taisie, that owns this ranch brand, now, she wants to try it again, north! Would you believe that? Wasn't

her father murdered by them damned people that beat up pore Jimmy Dougherty on the Missoury border two years ago? Huh! He was crazy to drive north. What did it bring him? His death, and the ruin of Del Sol!

"That girl's been wanting, all this month, to make up a herd and drive north! Can you figure that out? Her a child, you might say, wanting to do what her father couldn't do, and take chances that cost him his life! Crazy, that's all. But who ever changed a Lockhart?

"And now, right here, this very morning"—Nabours beat on the table with his fist—"she comes in and declares herself. Says she's broke and can't pay her hands. Turns us all loose—every man! Her a girl only twenty-two, a orphant at that, and not a soul to take care of her! Great God! Well, that's what cows comes to in Texas."

The young man nodded, still silent, his face grave.

"Of course," resumed Nabours, "we wouldn't go. Shore, we ain't had no wages for a spell; but who has? And what has wages got to do with it, us working for a orphant, and that particular orphant being the Del Sol boss? Quit? Why I've worked on the brand forty years, man and boy! I couldn't quit nohow, if I tried. She ought to know that. Makes me mad."

"Perhaps she thought of how her father always paid. She has his sense of honor."

"Well, we didn't go. I just told the boys to go on out and brand long ears, like we been doing since the war. There ain't no money in it. I did hope we'd have a hard winter, to kill off some of the range stock. What do we get? Two soft winters when the flies didn't die! Not a half of one per cent loss, and the whole ungodly

world getting so damned full of calves that a man couldn't make a living skinning dead stock on the water fronts, not if he had twelve pairs of hands! Dead? There ain't no dead—they're all alive! What's worse, they keep getting aliver. This whole state, come couple more mild winters, 'll turn into tails and horns. And if I needed a new saddle or a pair of boots I'd have to steal them. Yet that girl, she's made life miserable for me to drive three thousand head north and get some money to pay us hands. You and me know that's foolish."

"Is it, though?"

Nabours looked at him suddenly.

"How else?"

"Well, I've just come down from that country. To-day there's something new up north."

"New?"

"Yes, plumb new. I don't mean Baxter Springs or Little Rock."

"You don't mean a real market north!"

"That is what I do mean! There'll be money in driving north after this spring."

Nabours looked at him for a time in silence.

"You'll have to show me how, Mr. McMasters. I ain't never been north of the Red, nor west of the Concho, though south of the Rio Grande, plenty. What I've learned is, a cow ain't worth a damn, and any cow man's a idjit, and he can't help keeping on being one."

"Very well, listen! The Kansas Pacific Railroad is building west across Kansas this spring as fast as they can lay rails. At the last town—that's Abilene—some men put their heads together on precisely this question

that's got us all guessing. A cow is worth four dollars —three—nothing down here. At the railroad he's worth ten, maybe more. East, he's worth twenty, maybe more. They need beef, and we've got beef, or the making of it. It needs no watchmaking to figure that this deadlock has got to break.

"Now, they've taken a chance at Abilene; they've put up shipping pens—so they told me at Wichita. They said you could follow up the Washita and cross the Canadian and go north; then hit in west of Wichita and swing north across the Arkansas to Abilene. And there's the market, man!

"That's the biggest news that ever came to Texas. It's bigger than San Jacinto. You know what that means, if you could get a herd through? Well, I'd say your boss had a good head on her shoulders."

Nabours sat silent, stupefied.

"I came in here through Caldwell," the visitor went on now, explanatory. "I've ridden over a perfectly practical trail for nearly a thousand miles so far as grass and water are concerned. I thought I'd bring this news in to Del Sol. I've known the Burleson Lockhart family all my life, of course, and of the hard place Colonel Lockhart's daughter has been forced into by his death. I wanted to ride in and see her, the first time since we were children."

The young man colored just a trace as he went on. "I wanted to bring her, as owner of a Texas brand, the news of the new market," said he. "Is she at home?"

"Didn't you see her when you came in?"

McMasters hesitated.

"I saw a young man. I didn't just know——"

The foreman smiled.

"I couldn't blame you. Well, I'm the only mother that girl has got left. I'm one hell of a mother! But still, I don't see why you didn't ride on up to the front door."

The young man's face flushed rather hotly, but he was guilty of no nervousness, did not even smile.

"No man could come on better business," said he. "It was not her fault. She did not know me, nor I her."

"You must go on up to the house," said Nabours. "First tell me, what took you north?"

McMasters looked at him in his cold way.

"Well," said he finally, "I'm a peace officer. I've been sheriff of Gonzales for six months. Perhaps you haven't heard the latest news about the Rangers. In spite of our carpetbagging friends, they're organized again, stronger than before the war, and with more to do. They gave me the honor of electing me a captain. I've been up north on a certain business."

Nabours nodded now silently.

"There's not a man here or in Central Texas that ain't sworn to kill the murderer of them two men, if ever he is found. You know that, Mr. McMasters."

"Yes! Nor is your oath more strong than mine."

McMasters turned to the silent negro, who had brought in a pan of water and a towel. As he turned up his sleeves, the cuffs of his linen shirt—as the rolled soft collar also might before then have disclosed—showed a dull red, not white. He laughed.

"A superstition," said he, nodding. "Sort of oath of the family. In the war my mother had to dye her

own clothing with pokeberry. She dyed a few of my father's shirts that way by mistake once. My father was so proud of our sacrifices to the cause—though he didn't think Texas should have seceded—that he swore he'd never have collars or cuffs any other color. Well, a new sheriff in Gonzales hasn't so many shirts. This one was once my father's. Yes, we're poor—poor, we Texans.

"Turn my horse in the round pen, please, sir," he concluded, when he had made himself neat as possible. "Would you please ask Miss Lockhart if she will see Mr. Dan McMasters, the son of her father's friend?"

CHAPTER III

THE ORPHAN OF DEL SOL

BLANCOCITO had dozed in the sun for a considerable interval. Hearing a sound at the front door, he turned an idle eye, and sprang back with a snort at sight of the unusual apparition which now descended the gallery steps—Anastasie Lockhart, no longer in male apparel, and by the merest accident coming out of the house as the two men would now have entered.

Jim Nabours was not accustomed to social formulas.

"Miss Taisie, this here is Mr. McMasters, of Gonzales, below. He's sher'f down there. I reckon you know who he is."

"I saw you when you came in, sir," said the mistress of Del Sol demurely, extending her hand. "Why did you not come up to breakfast?"

While McMasters, his eyes fixed on hers, was explaining his travel-worn condition, Jim Nabours was wondering how and why in the name of all the saints of the Southwest Taisie had managed in so short a time to change from her daily ranch costume to this feminine marvel of fresh lawn, with ruffled flounces and great belled skirt. She even had white mitts—yellow-white with age. But Taisie saw no reason to explain that much of her apparel once had been her mother's, and was now fresh resurrected. Jim did not know the mys-

teries of a certain rawhide chest so well as old black Milly, who had served in the Burleson Lockhart family before they moved into the border country. Had he known he might also have had a guess at the miracle of Taisie's heavy hair, no longer banded like an Indian woman's but done up in some sort of high twisted mass that left visible the milk-white nape of a neck not always otherwise protected against the sun.

In good truth Anastasie—such was her mother's Louisiana name in baptism, and her own—was not unmindful of the ways of woman in older lands, in spite of the surroundings into which fate had cast her. And truly she was beautiful—rarely, astonishingly, confusingly beautiful. The man did not live who could have seen her now and not have felt his heart leap to joy in the universe and its ways.

She led them back into the house. Her very presence filled the low-ceiled room, one of the two at the right of the four corners made by the right-angled double halls. The adobe ranch house of Del Sol was built like others of the Saxon Southwest, so that each breath of air might be caught from any direction of the wind; an arrangement cooler than a patio for a house surrounded on two sides by a grove of giant live oaks draped heavily in Spanish moss.

The interior gave a rude setting for a picture such as this young woman made. The ease and luxury of lower Louisiana, for a wealthy generation of sugar-cane planters the repository of Europe's best art and last luxuries, were not reflected in the first Saxon generation of the Texas border. True, the furniture in part was traceable to earlier days. Two paintings, three

framed samplers, told of a mother's hands. There was a heavy claw-foot table. A few mismated chairs of the Empire stood in a row. But a rawhide settee and four splat-bottom chairs frankly admitted the limit of such supplies; the prevailing flavor of the borderland could not be denied. Not so much of a marvel, for at that time there was not a hundred miles of railroad within the boundaries of Texas, and everything from the East must survive the toil and danger of wagon freighting.

In one corner of the room was a conical upright Mexican fireplace. Opposed to this and covered with soft tanned baby-calfskins of varied colors, stood the one thing which had saved the soul of Anastasie Lockhart the first, as of Anastasie the second—the piano, regarded with awe by all the cattle hands. On the piano stood, now, a vase of flowers. They were very fresh flowers. Jim Nabours knew they had not been there an hour earlier, for he had called before breakfast and they were not there then; though he knew Taisie's garden had some blossoms.

What shall escape the eye of a maiden? Tapered conchas on a bridle strap, neat boots, a well-shaped hat, a way of sitting in a saddle, the air of a family that had once come down from Tennessee on the Natchez Trace and the Old River Road, to Louisiana, to Texas? Nay, not so easily are a maid's eyes baffled, though she shall have had but a single look at a newcome young man opening her gate a hundred yards away. Hence these flowers, hence this frock, the reason for which Jim Nabours could not analyze.

Mr. Dan McMasters, new sheriff of Gonzales, mighty young for that job, was a proper man. A vague sense

of uneasiness came to the soul of Foreman Jim as he saw his comeliness and ease of manner. He felt he had been betrayed—did not feel familiar with these new little ways.

"You see, Miss Lockhart," went on McMasters when he had taken his own seat on the cowhide settee, "I've been north, up the Indian roads. As I was only fifty miles away, I thought I would ride in."

"You are very welcome, sir. Our families always have been friends."

The voice of Anastasie Lockhart was the color of her hair. Almost, you could call her hair vibrant.

"Yes, my family always has known your family. I wanted to see you once more. That must have been my main reason. You—you have grown, Miss Lockhart. I'd not have known you. But just now I was talking with your segundo. He thought you might like to hear some word I am bringing down to Texas from the North."

"He means they've started a cattle market up North on the railroad, Miss Taisie," broke in Jim Nabours.

"Market? There's going to be a shipping point—do you mean that, sir?" The girl turned swiftly.

"I think so, yes," replied Dan McMasters. "It's at Abilene, in Kansas, right north of Wichita. You see, Wichita's not far across the Kansas line, above the Nations."

"Abilene?"

"No one ever heard of it. It's head of the rails on the Kansas Pacific, the new road that's building west. They want cattle. They are promising a market."

The girl's eyes kindled.

"That's news!"

He nodded.

"Yes. The railroads are planning to run up the Arkansas the same as up the Platte—and that's done, now. That whole country north of here, from all I can hear about it, is a thousand by two thousand miles of natural cow land. Grass? They tell me that farther on west there's millions of acres of what they call buffalo grass—short, like our grama. Maybe it won't carry cows, but some say it will. It certainly fattens the buffalo. And there isn't a cow in it all; it's empty and waiting for range stock—to say nothing of the Eastern demand."

Nabours broke in.

"We know we could herd as far as Wichita. Shore we could get from there to Aberlene."

"Yes," said this prophet of a new day; "and we would find Eastern buyers—farmers and feeders and beef men—waiting to buy our stuff as fast as we drove it through."

"Really?" Taisie Lockhart almost forgot her morning's troubles. "Really?"

"Why, yes, I reckon it's true, from what the men told me that came down to cut the trail in the Nations. They declare there'll be buyers for all we can drive, up to a hundred thousand head—yes, two-three hundred thousand!"

Inarticulate sound came in Anastasie's throat. She cast a triumphant glance at her foreman.

"Well, now, ma'am, how was I to know?" defended Jim. "I never did hear of no Aberlene, not in my whole life, till this young gentleman rid in here this morning."

"Well, you ought to have heard of it!" rejoined his employer with a woman's logic. "Why, man, that's what all Texas has been starving for for years! Didn't I tell you? Haven't I been telling you? Haven't I been begging you to make a herd and drive north, somewhere, and trust to God to find buyers there, since there's no hope here, south or east? Haven't I told you, Jim?"

"I reckon you did, ma'am," admitted her aid. "Same time, you didn't know a damned thing about it."

"Oh, you!" Taisie turned to him. "Do you expect to have people show you what's in their hands before you draw cards? Can't you take a chance?"

"For my own self, yes, Miss Taisie. For you—we all was scared. Especial we was scared when you said you was going along."

"But I am going along! And I am going to put up a herd!"

"Now, Miss Lockhart," ventured Dan McMasters, "you couldn't do that. Your men can put up a herd and drive north for you, but no woman ever has gone north of the Red, or ever ought to try it. There's no real trail—it's all wild north of here for fifteen hundred miles or more. There's not a bridge—I've swum ten rivers and forded a hundred. There are Indians. There are storms—and no shelter for you. Miss Lockhart, there's not a man in Texas ever would let you go."

"There's not men enough in all Texas to keep me from going!"

Taisie's grief was entirely forgotten now.

"Even your father——" Jim began.

"Don't!" Sudden tears came to the girl's eyes.

"She allus bogs down—about her father," explained Nabours.

"I'll not bog down! I'll get over this some day. Why, the reason I want to go north is to find the man that did it! He's somewhere up there."

McMasters, captain in the Rangers, looked at her with a sudden kindling of his own cool eyes; but he said nothing. The mistress of Del Sol stamped her foot in its cross-banded slipper.

"Always you treat me like a girl. I'm not!"

"Yes, you are, Miss Taisie," rejoined Jim Nabours. "You're a girl, and I'm your mother and your father both, till you get a new segundo."

"Listen at him!" Taisie turned to the young stranger. "The whole state of Texas is dying on its feet, and the men of Texas scared to drive, with maybe five dollars a head waiting for them at the railroad! That's riches!

"How long would it take?" she demanded of her informant.

"All season, practically," replied McMasters. "I rode about forty miles a day, coming south, and I was eleven hundred miles away at one time. Cows could go ten miles a day, maybe, if you could keep the herd going; say two-three hundred miles a month. Say three-four months—that would cover a heap of trail."

"All the distance between here and heaven! All the difference between poverty and self-respect! Oh!"—she looked him fair in the face—"it's no use to pretend! Do you know what I did this very morning, sir, just before you rode in? Do you know why I'm crying now? I can't help it. Why, I was down there to tell

my men that I'd turned them all loose this morning. I discharged them all. I told them I was broke, that I couldn't pay my hands.

"Poor? Don't I know! Go back to Gonzales and tell your people that the last Lockhart's down in the dust. I've got no pride left at all, because I'm broke. Do you wonder that I cry?"

"She did!" said Jim Nabours. "She is!"

McMasters turned away and looked out the window. The tears of such a woman made one thing no man could face.

"But, of course," added the foreman, "I taken all that in my own hands. I just sont the hands out like usual. Seems like I can hear the irons sizzling on about a dozen long ears by now already."

"And the lot not worth a pinch of old Milly's snuff!" commented Taisie. "The market—that's the one thing! Mr. McMasters has brought news!"

"I almost hesitate over it," said the young man. "I can't bring it free of risk and danger."

"You don't know my men!" broke out Taisie proudly.

"Oh, yes, I do! I know us all, ma'am. They—we would all die first. But suppose that was not enough?"

"And if I'm a woman, at least I'm not an old woman. I'll drive the first Texas herd to the railroad with my own men if it takes our last horse and last man! It's north for me, or I'm gone. When you rode in, sir, I was at the lowest ebb of all my life."

"I wish the tide may turn, Miss Lockhart," said young Dan McMasters quietly.

"It will—I believe it has!" She was on her feet, her

eyes bright, her color up. "Why, listen! I'll take Anita and Milly both along. We've two carretas left. Jim, you old coward"—her hand was on his shoulder affectionately—"you know you told me you could make a herd of five thousand fours in our brand inside of a day's ride from Del Sol. Even if it was beeves——

"Tell me, what ages?" She turned suddenly to McMasters.

"I can't say yet," was his reply. "Fours and long threes would do best for shipping East. But the talk I heard is that there'll be use for stockers—even yearlings, too, because the range is open all in north and west of there. People are crowding out to the buffalo range, following the railroads. It's unbelievable how crazy they are. It seems as though they felt they just have got to get West. They'll all need cattle."

A new expression came to his face as he went on:

"There's millions of acres of unbroken land up there, north of the old slavery line of 36-30. It will take North and South both to make it. It will be the West! It will be the heart of America!"

"We'll be the first to see it! There's no age from calf to fifty years Del Sol can't drive!" said Taisie Lockhart decisively. "How many?"

"That depends on your force of hands. Some said three thousand head was around what a herd should be. A dozen hands could drive it—say fifteen-twenty. Each man ought to have at least six or eight horses in his string. There'll be riding."

"Well, what of that? I can turn out twenty men who can talk to cows in their own language. We wouldn't

miss thirty-five hundred fours, Jim says. When shall we start?"

She still was smiling, eager; but the look in her eyes was one of resolution; and as Jim had said, a Lockhart never changed.

"Jesse Chisholm just followed the grass," answered McMasters presently. "It's green here in March, and it's February now. Once across the Colorado and the Brazos, we'd go clean to the Red, easy—I know my father always said that. He said a driver could go in west of Austin and Fort Worth, and get to the north edge of Texas and be almost sure not to see an Indian. The Comanches are away west of that line. We're about on the ninety-eighth meridian here, and near the thirtieth parallel. My father said that it was a new world north of thirty-six degrees north latitude. That land is all unmapped. No one lives there but the Indians."

"She eats Comanches," said Jim Nabours. "Little thing like them don't bother her none. As for swimming a herd acrost a spring fresh, with quicksand on both sides, why, she don't mind that none a-tall!"

An ominous silence and a heightened color did not impress him. At length his employer went on, addressing the visitor:

"Very well. Say fifteen men and a wrangler and a cook, with me and black Milly, my cook, and Anita, my Spanish woman. We'd take the two carretas, with oxen for them and the cook's wagon. Sixteen riders by six or eight horses is a hundred or a hundred and fifty for the remuda—we'd do it easy."

"Plumb easy!" came Jim's solemn comment. "A

thousand miles in a carreta without a spring, right over a crooked mesquite ex, is right simple. About one week and Milly'd die, her going three hundred net right now; and Anita'd die of homesickness for her jacal she's used to living in.

"Besides, ma'am"—here the foreman's voice changed—"I may as well talk plain. Not joking, we can't live on beef straight. Three-four months of meal and beans and molasses for twenty men is more than we have got, though meal and beans and molasses and side meat we'd have to have, and coffee if we could. The hands work better for coffee, mornings, and after rains or hard rides."

The color on poor Taisie's cheeks grew deeper in humiliation. She spread out her hands.

"I'm broke! I've said that!"

There was silence for some time. At length the young sheriff of Gonzales spoke quietly.

"Miss Lockhart," said he, "I don't like to hear that word in Texas."

"Truth is the simplest!"

"Yes, I know. But what one ranch in Texas doesn't happen to have the neighbors do have—they always have had. Take in one or two neighbors with you for the drive—say a thousand head, each brand. They'd be glad to put up the wagon and the remuda. You must not push away your neighbors. This is Texas."

A cold rage met his sincerity and friendliness.

"I'll have help from no one! Del Sol will drive a lone herd north, win or lose. I'll take it all back, Jim—you're all hired on again, the last man of you. You'll

stand by me? I'll sell my cows and pay my men; and then I'll see if there's any law in the North or any men in the South to help me find a murderer."

"Ma'am," said Jim Nabours, "you've put it now so's't not one of us can help hisself. We got to go. When hell freezes we'li all walk out on the ice together.

"But you got to thank Mr. McMasters for what he's done told us, Miss Taisie," he added. "I reckon he's our best neighbor."

"I do thank you, sir!" The girl rose and held out her hand frankly. The young man bent over it. He did not seat himself again. "But you'll stop a day or so with us?"

"No, I must be riding now," he answered.

He found his hat, bowed, passed out the door with no dallying or indecision; nor said a word about return. He was abrupt to coldness, if not to rudeness.

Anastasie Lockhart looked through the window shades so intently that her hand remained not fallen after it had drawn them; so intently that she did not hear old Milly as she entered.

"Laws, Miss Taisie, is that young gemman gone? I done brung in some likker fer him. He's quality, Miss Taisie! Who is he, an' whah he come from? Is he done ask you about marryin' yit?"

"Not yet, Milly," answered Anastasie.

She sat down in the one rocking-chair, staring at the uncarpeted floor. She was older now than she had been an hour ago. Why had this neighbor not promised an early return? And was he not a strangely stiff and silent young man? Were the honors of sheriff and cap-

tain so much as to render him superior to a girl with red hair who wore her mother's clothes, years old?

Anastasie Lockhart, astonishingly vital, astonishingly beautiful, rose to find a mirror so that she could read an answer. As she did so she recognized, standing at the end of the rawhide settee, where her visitor could not have failed to see the sudden disorder of its interior, the rawhide trunk which long had served alike as wardrobe and safety vault for her. Vexed at the revelation of her first untidiness in housekeeping, she bent now to close the heavy lid once more. Suddenly she went to her knees beside it, her eyes wet once more at what she saw of silk and lace gone to bits. She caught up the fragments to her cheeks.

A daguerreotype in its disintegrating frame lay to her hand. She opened it. Her mother. Yes, she had been beautiful. And this frame was the twin of it—her father. She turned it to catch the light so that the likeness would show. A bold, bearded face, aquiline, high. She sighed as she looked at the picture of a man cut down by an assassin in the full of his strength and resolution.

Below these things and others lay to half the depth of the old chest a mass of papers, all similar. Contemptuously she thrust in her hands, her arms, to the elbows.

"Scrip!" she murmured to herself. "Scrip for more Texas land, to raise more Texas cows! He was mad about it—scrip, scrip was all he thought! I only hope that he did not see it!" She meant Dan McMasters. "But of course he did—he couldn't help it, where he sat.

"Well, it's no matter," she added mentally. "He's

not coming back again. If I'd known how cold he was I'd not have troubled!"

She spread out her long brown hands over her mother's frock as, still kneeling, she sat back on her heels, in her mother's cross-banded shoes.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOOT OF THE TRAIL

THE sun-drenched landscape of the Southwest lay warm, indolent, full of somber fire. The home buildings rested in the arm of a great live-oak grove, opposite whose opening appeared a wide land of rolling contours, now almost in the thin green of coming spring. Six miles away the tree lines showed a stream, and beyond that, as most folk knew, lay the great lake which originally had led Burleson Lockhart to take up this range. This side and that ran miles of mesquite, stretching south, tall cactuses showing betimes among the twisted thorny trees.

It was a little-known corner of America, in what one day was to be known as the great breeding range, last of the holdings above the Rio Grande to fall from the lax hand of Spain. The lack of rain left the vegetation anguished. A thousand distorted souls in torment lived in these gray trees. Soon the direct sun rays would again be searing into brown the new and tender grass, though it scarce had had its one annual chance to gasp in green.

A lizard scuttled across the dust of the dooryard. A road-runner sped along the fence of poles and rawhide, bent on its own mission. War was marked in every sign and token of Texas from its very first. No manner of pest and curse ever lacked in its cynically indif-

ferent confines. Starvation, thirst, filled these mud-thickened bayous every year with hundreds of dead horses. The bones of cattle lay uncounted for a thousand miles, each dried hide and rack of whitening bones enriching soil that had no answer to its own fecundity in animal life. To live, to breed and to die—that was all that animal life there could do. Nothing to the dead creature that it had never known the shambles. The rack of bones was good enough for Spain.

But now had come Saxon men. Texas, savage, abounding, multiplying undisturbed, was now for the first time seeking outlet for her superabundant life, which for fifty years had increased undisturbed. Texas owned millions of worthless cattle; how many, no owner knew, nor could any man tell how far his cows ranged. He did not care. Unbranded cattle still ran in thousands. No one hunted strays, and the increase of strays belonged without reservation to the land that fed them. There was no cattle association, no general rodeo; and the home gatherings never claimed to be complete. Title, whether in land or cattle, was much a matter of indifference.

Of law there was little. A vast and unknown empire was controlled by a rude baronry whose like the world has never seen; who later were vastly to extend that empire and its ways.

These men set up the one great law of custom. The custom of the range was based on the natural habits of the cattle and the natural peculiarities of the grazing lands. The accepted brand, the right of the finder to an unowned range or water front, the tendency of cattle to cling to home, the law of natural probability in all

things—such were rigid natural laws which no man might ignore with safety. As animal life ran wild, so also did human life, one no more restrained than the other. Only the saving grace of the Saxon instinct for some sort of law brought Texas, literally born in the wilderness, up to what she is to-day.

There was no market. At least, rambling and unconcerted attempts had found none till now. After the Civil War a seething unrest passed over all Texas. The demand for some sort of market was first in the thought of all men who owned nothing but cows and reasoned only in terms of cows.

She's going to drive!" said Jim Nabours to his new-found friend as they crossed the Del Sol dooryard. "That's her pap's old idee. What you've said cinches it!"

"Yes? When can you begin the herd?"

The old cowman's face clouded.

"Listen here! Keep what I tell you. That girl knows a lot about cows, but a heap of things about her own cows she don't know. She knows how many her father had and she thinks she's got more. She hain't."

"Combed?"

"Yes, combed! We're too close to Austin! Hide hunters and calf hunters and plain thieves and politics—that's since the war. The damn Yankees are trying to run a country they don't know nothing about. All Central Texas has took to hunting cows. This here's a good place for thieves—or for men who can see ahead a little ways.

"We didn't know it till just now, but there must of

been a band of skinners and slick hunters working our range all last winter and winter afore. She ain't got one cow now where she thinks she's got fifty. What could we do? We didn't know, and don't know, who done it; but we didn't durst to let her really know it was did. Now, she's going to find out."

"But surely you can make up a mixed herd anyhow!"

"Oh, yes, maybe. But if we do hit a market, where'll we round up the next herd for her? Some one else has got our cows. There's a big steal been going on in Central Texas.

"You see, we done our damnedest to take care of her and not let her know. God ha' mercy on me! I'm the worstest perjured liar in Texas, and that's a big claim. We've had a rodeo now and then, here at the home place, but she didn't know how fur we driv some of them cows!

"But how could we fool her if we put up a big herd? She kin read a brand as well as us. We'd road brand, I reckon—yes; but that wouldn't change the facts none. She'd ketch on. She ain't no fool, that girl. What do you say, then?"

"Why, I say start your round-up to-morrow! Keep in the T. L., the Del Sol brand, or do the best you can. It will come to a show-down anyhow before long, so why wait? Let hers be the first herd north of the Red this spring. While the others are thinking it over, let's be up the trail! Believe me, all Texas will be moving north before long!"

"She pops!" said Jim Nabours suddenly. He had decided.

"How long to make the herd?" McMasters also kindled.

"Two weeks. We could brand out within another two, only we'll have to rope and throw. Our pens won't hold. We got no chute."

"Build one to-day. It will pay you."

Nabours looked at the newcomer curiously with an eye not free of suspicion.

"You taken a mighty interest." He spoke slowly.

"I have! I want to go up the trail with you-all. I've reason for going north again. My business there wasn't settled."

"But what's your reasons for being so brash about coming in with us? I dunno's I've give you leave, and I know the boss didn't."

"Two reasons. One I've told you—the business that took me north and brought me south will take me north again. Never mind what that is. I'm a captain of Rangers, and we can't talk. The other reason you can guess."

"I reckon I do guess."

"Muy bien! Our families both came in with Stephen Austin. They both had men massacred with Fannin at Goliad. They both had men in the Alamo. Her father and mine were both killed up the trail. Do you think any McMasters would let any Lockhart starve? Listen! You say she's poor; say her range is skinned. Tell her nothing—but please let a McMasters help a Lockhart. Let me send you fifty horses and two wagon-loads of grub. You needn't let her know. Make it a loan or gift, either way you please. And let me ride with you."

A surprising irrelevancy marked Jim Nabours' next remark.

"That girl can marry twenty-seven men to-morrow morning. She ain't going to marry no one until she knows who killed Burleson Lockhart. 'Bring me the man that finds my father's murderer,' says she, 'and I believe I'd marry him.' "

"She said that?"

"*Si, señor.* Maybe meant it, or thought she did. You can't tell much about no woman, and least of all about Burleson Lockhart's daughter. One thing, she'll be slow to quit anything she starts. She's sot now on driving. I reckon she will."

By now they had approached the cook house and the corral. McMasters had his bridle from the saddle that straddled the pole near the bunk-house door. Soon he had his horse under saddle. His pistol belt was now in place again.

The foreman looked at it curiously as the two walked toward the rawhide gate. Nabours pushed it open. As he did so a warning rattle sounded almost underfoot. He sprang back with an oath. With the word came a shot, not from his own weapon. The brown body of the serpent was flung writhing, headless. McMasters' pistol was back at its belt when Nabours turned.

"Who done that?" he demanded.

"I did," said McMasters. "You'd have stepped on him."

"Well, if I want to step on a rattler, that's my business, ain't it? Maybe I like to step on them. You shooting made me jump. Still, quick work, huh?"

"I don't know."

"Are you a good shot?"

"I was elected sheriff of Gonzales. I am a captain in the Texas Rangers."

His face was grave as he spoke, sad rather than boastful.

"What's that?" suddenly exclaimed Jim Nabours. "Listen!"

The sound of hoofs had come suddenly from around the bend of the trail that wound through the mesquite thicket screening the gate; hoofs of more than one animal, not coming but going.

"Wait!"

The sound of the young man's voice deterred Nabours as much as his hand. He stood, absorbed, frowning, listening to the receding hoof beats. The rhythm told him the horses had riders. At last he beckoned to Nabours. The two set out down the trail.

"Look here!" said Dan McMasters at length as they rounded the bend.

At a clump of huisache the tracks of six horses could be seen making a trampled spot back of the bushes. It all was plainly visible to eyes experienced as these.

"They was tied!" said Jim Nabours.

McMasters nodded, bending over the bruised stems which the reins had covered.

"They must have closed up a lot last night," said Dan McMasters cryptically, as though to himself. "They couldn't have been far off this morning.

"Thank you, Mr. Rattler!" He smiled grimly as he kicked at a crooked stick for substitute of the dead snake. "You served me a good turn!"

CHAPTER V

MARRIAGE, COWS AND CARPETBAGS

THE foreman of Del Sol stood, hands in pockets, for some time, looking down the trace whither the late visitor had disappeared. His head was dropped forward, as one in studious distrust of his own judgment; a frown yet more wrinkled his forehead. At length he turned and found his way, not to the corrals, but to the house.

Blancocito still stood dozing in the sun. The mistress of Del Sol was not riding this morning. Jim knocked at the front door.

"Come!"

He entered. Taisie was sitting at the end of the rawhide settee, still in her bravest finery. Her hands lay in her lap; her eyes were somber, clouded; doubt, distrust appeared her portion also.

She had looked about her with appraising eye; had reflected also. All about, in every token, she saw evidences of lapse, of retrogression, of decay, indeed of poverty rapidly running to seed. The lack of a strong hand was not to be denied. Moreover, the conditions of this property were reflected all over a state, where not even the strongest hand or the clearest mind had been able to achieve solution. It was the hour of travail for a great, unknown, forgotten country. Taisie Lock-

hart might have known that the travail of a country is only the multiple of many individual pains.

She looked now at her faithful henchman, silent for a time.

"Now, ma'am——"

"Yes, Jim?"

Nabours dropped into a chair, gripping the legs with twining spurred feet.

"I was going to ast you how you liked this Gonzales man, ma'am. He's went now."

"Were you taking a shot at him for luck, Jim? I heard a shot." She tried to smile.

"No'm. It was him. A rattler was by the gate. He shot its head off. I must say he done it quick and easy too."

"Well, he can ride."

"Uh-huh—and shoot. Yes, I reckon. Fact is, he's got a reputation now, for a young man. He's the youngest sher'f in Texas, like enough. He's only in six months, and in that time his county has done shrunk more'n a thousand population. He ain't killed that many, ma'am—no; but he has done killed four or five, and them bad. Then when the Rangers was pulled together again and him put in as a captain, a good many of them people taken the hint and moved. It was time. Down there and in Uvalde there was plenty of men that didn't own a head or a acre, who'd agree to put you up a herd of five thousand head on a month's notice.

"I tell you, ma'am, the times is bad. The cow business in this state is in one hell of a fix. . . . Well, it takes good shooting to be a sher'f, let alone a Ranger."

"Four? Four men? He killed them?" A sort of horror was in her voice, her eyes.

"In duty, ma'am. It don't hardly count."

"He did not look—like that!"

"Huh! He didn't? Well, I'd say he did! When he put on his guns they was two, and he wore his right-hand gun pointing back and his left-hand one pointing forward. I never seen no man do that before. If that don't look perfessional killer I ain't no jedge. Now, which gun he done use to kill the rattler I never could tell.

"He makes me study, ma'am. His eye is cold as ice. He don't talk and he don't laugh. He's got something on his mind. Somehow——"

"You'd trust him, Jim?"

"Ef he was on my side. But how in hell can you tell by looking at him whose side he is on?"

"Four men! Yes"—her voice trailed off—"I thought he was—well, cold. He never did—start."

"No; and most does, Miss Taisie. And you that was dressed up your best for him; and him a stranger you hadn't saw sence he was a boy, and hadn't spoke to now till he come in and seen you. And he didn't start!

"Miss Taisie, I've set in some games, but I can't read that feller's game. He's friendly, but he's so damned mysterious I can't get no line on him."

"What brought him here, Jim?"

"You, Miss Taisie! You bring 'em all here. Trouble is, all that comes is dead broke; no more'n a saddle and a pair of spurs to their name. But the McMasters family ain't broke.

"Now, one thing is shore, Miss Taisie: This here

can't go on forever. I ain't no good at advice to womenfolks; all I can advise is cows and caballos. But it looks plain to me that before long, you being a orphant, you got to be married to some kind of a man. Peaceable ef we can, by force ef we must, it looks plain to me, which am both yore paw and maw, Miss Taisie, we got to get you-all married. It can't no ways run on this way much furder'n what it has."

A dimple came in each of Anastasie Lockhart's brown cheeks.

"Well, Jim?"

"But not to this man, no matter what he do, Miss Taisie! Not till I can clean up my own mind. I'm oncertain on him somehow. Friends and neighbors he ought to be—shore he ought. But Calvin McMasters, his dad, was agin slavery and secession, and your paw was with the South he was raised in. Them two was friends. I wouldn't call the McMasterses damn Yankees. But I can't place him yet.

"Now, how about Del Williams? You know he's been waiting and hoping. He went to the war because you wouldn't. He hung on with old Kirby Smith to the last, wondering ef you would. He's come back after the surrender, hoping you would. He's a good honest boy, that wears one gun one way and saves his money, when he gets any. He's a good segundo and he knows cows."

"Is that all I may ask?"

The girl's voice was almost wistful. True, she was of the border. But she had seen the wider world. There were books on shelves in that very room. The portraits of her father and her mother were faces of

aristocrats. Their lives had been those of adventurers. To know cows? Was that all the husband of the daughter of these two needed to possess?

"Miss Taisie, cows is all we got—and we ain't got them."

"I know it, Jim. I told you this morning, I'm broke. I was going to sell out, move out. I was going to try to teach school, or something, over East somewhere. Jim, it's awful to be poor."

"It's awfuler when you ain't been always, Miss Taisie."

"But I'll not be, now! We're going to drive!"

"You say so, ma'am. It sounds so easy!"

"Why can't we? Tell me? Haven't I got cow hands working for me? Haven't I got fifty thousand cows in the T. L.? You say sixty-five thousand. Isn't the world full of grass and water north of here? Didn't you hear what he told you—hasn't my father told you—that there's a whole other world waiting up north, not a man nor a cow nor a horse in it, hardly; just waiting? Jim, the time to make money is when times are bad. If we haven't got cash we've got sand. This may be a time of despair or a time of opportunity. It's always been that way, all over the world. When some despair others win—if they've sand to do it."

"You talk like a book I read oncet, ma'am. It was full of maximuns."

Taisie stamped her foot.

"We'll put up a herd and trail it! I'll go along! We'll be utterly broke—or else we'll win!"

"You can't go along, Miss Taisie. No woman could."

"But I will!"

"You make things right hard for yore segundo, Miss Taisie."

"Jim! Jim! Don't talk that way! Don't you think I know? Isn't all this hard for me too? But if we have luck I'll make it easier for you-all."

"You're just a girl, Miss Taisie. Let's get married first, huh? I don't mean me. How about you and Del?"

The girl rose, a native imperiousness in her gesture.

"Leave those things to me!"

"Oh, all right, all right," sighed Nabours. "But maybe you'll leave some things to me?"

"What?"

The old range man rose and spread his hands.

"Miss Taisie," said he, "fire me! I'm the damnedest liar in Texas!"

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"I am. I been lying to you. You ain't got no cows left, hardly. Our range has been combed and skinned; for two years it's been going on—I don't know how long before. You ain't got no sixty-five nor fifty thousand cows. You're lucky if you can put up a herd of four thousand. We've all lied to you. We couldn't tell you the truth. Ma'am, this outfit would all lay down and die for you. They'd do almost anything but tell you the truth. We couldn't do that. We didn't have the nerve."

The girl sank back, her face pale.

"Why, Jim! I didn't really know!"

"No, ma'am. Some gang's at work in here, and north and west of here—far north as Palo Pinto.

We've been away, enduring the war and after the war. We're all broke, us Texans. But in Austin is plenty people ain't broke none a-tall. We don't know nothing, can't prove nothing. All I say is, in Austin is plenty people ain't broke a-tall."

"You mean the Yankee treasurer?"

"I don't say out loud what I do mean. All I know is, our range is skinned; and I know we're up against a strong game. That's why, ma'am, looking for the best of Del Sol and what yore paw meant for her, and looking for yore own good interests, too, I been advising you to get married. That'd simple up a lot of things.

"You see, then we could settle down and raise cows. We could build up the range again. They ain't going to be so brash about things when they know they's a real man in charge of Del Sol. But a orphant is easy picking for a man like Rudabaugh and his gang of carpetbagging thieves."

"You mean Rudabaugh?"

"I shore do. In Austin, we don't know what's going on. In office and out, there's a new gang in there. They're organized fer to steal this here whole state, lock, stock and barrel. They don't stop at nothing. They allow the war ain't never done; that us Texans ain't never surrendered; that Lee's still a enemy; and that all this state is fair picking fer men that wasn't never borned nor raised in Texas, orphants and all. They got wide idees, yes. But they ain't idees that was borned in Texas, ma'am."

"And are we helpless, Jim?"

"Damn nigh it, ma'am."

"But surely we could raise two or three thousand

head, of some sort, to drive north this spring. Leave them the empty house, Jim! Leave them the Del Sol round pen without a horse in it! Leave them our range—empty! But by the Lord——"

She smote fist in palm, walked. Her foreman's fighting blood kindled at the flame of the old courage that had brought families into this wilderness.

"Yes, by the Lord! Taisie, child, ef ever we do get on our feet, us Texans, we'll line up against them people and we'll see it through!"

"Then we'll drive, Jim?"

"Yes, we'll drive! Ef it takes the last hoof, we'll drive this spring, come grass. I don't know nothing about the country; I never driv a herd so fur, and no one else never has. But ef you'll let us do our very best, we'll bust north inside of thirty days!"

He caught both her long brown hands in his own gnarled and crooked ones, his stubbled face grave, his gray eyes troubled; a figure not impressive in his broken boots, his torn checked trousers, but with a sincerity proved these years since his boyhood under this girl's father.

"You'll take it fair, child, ef we do the best we can fer you! You'll never holler?"

"You know I never will, Jim. And you know I'll go along and I'll go through."

"Lord help you, Miss Taisie! And Lord help us too! There's been times when my job seemed a heap easier than what it does right now!"

Author's Note.—There is no Gregg, no Parkman, no Chittenden for the lost and forgotten cattle trail. Although almost as important as the east-and-west rail-

roads in the early development of the trans-Missouri, it has no map, no monument, no history, almost no formulated condition. There is a comprehensive literature covering our westbound expansion, but of the great north-and-south pastoral road almost the contrary must be said, such is the paucity of titles.

The classic of the cattle trade of the West is a crude book, now rare, by Joseph G. McCoy, called *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest.* It is upon this book that the author has rested most largely in endeavoring to restore the feel of the early cattle drives. It was printed in 1874.

Within the past two years Mr. George W. Saunders, of San Antonio, Texas, has printed a book, *The Trail Drivers of Texas,* containing brief life stories from the pens of more than a hundred men who trailed cattle before and after the railroad days. These sketches are human documents. The author wishes to acknowledge obligations to this work, which he has used almost literally in many passages for the sake of known accuracy.

The books of Andy Adams—*The Log of a Cowboy; Wayne Anthony, Cow Man; Wells Brothers; A Texas Matchmaker; The Outlet*—make the most authentic fiction or quasi fiction of the trail days. Mr. Adams made trips on northern drives, his experience beginning in 1882. His books are storehouses of later trail data. The author makes acknowledgment to that source of information. Records of army exploration also have been useful.

The quasi biography of Chas. A. Siringo, *A Lone Star Cowboy,* is still another, and very useful record of life in the early Southwest. It abounds in facts as well as in thrilling incidents. The author can personally testify to its accuracy in many details of the bloody history of New Mexico. Mr. Siringo's boyhood dates back into the Texas that existed before the northern trails began.

The author himself went to the Southwest in 1881; has lived and traveled in the West all his life; and has followed or crossed the old cattle trail at perhaps fifty points between

the Gulf and Northern boundary lines. The term of years thus indicated covers many changes. The future will bring yet swifter change. As to the great pastoral days of the West, it is high time for a fiction that may claim to be faithful and reverent.

Fiction cannot be exact, else it would be history and not fiction. That it should fairly reflect the spirit of its chosen day goes without saying. To lurid writers who never could have known the West, the author has found himself unable to contract any debt, but would make full acknowledgment to all who have aided from a wider information or experience.

CHAPTER VI

THE LONE HERD

"AND I'll bet this is the sorriest herd of cows that ever was made on the soil of Texas!" There was grief in the tones of old Jim Nabours as he turned away from the dusty flat where the circling riders were holding the main body of the T. L. gathering. For many days the men had been riding mesquite thicket, timbered flat and open glade, sweeping in the cattle in a general rodeo for the making of the trail herd. This was the result.

"About one in ten of what we'd orto of had, and what she still thinks she's got," he added, speaking to his own trail segundo, bearded young Del Williams, as they pulled up and looked back at the cattle.

Williams nodded.

"It's been a system," said he. "Some one's stripped the whole upper range. We'd orto had fifty riders instead of ten—and not a Mexican in the lot—to ride the upper water fronts. I got my own suspicions."

"And me. But what's the use? The war come and we couldn't help it. But even if cows wasn't worth a damn we ought to of knew how many we didn't have. Till now, I never really did."

Williams nodded. A tall, well-favored youth he was, with the gravity of the returned soldier. He still, fault

of better, wore the Confederate gray. His garb was worn and patched, like that of the foreman.

"They robbed that range after the old man was killed and afore we-all got here in charge. For over two years Del Sol was let plumb alone. Laguna del Sol! Best range in Texas, and the onliest place in all Texas that ain't boiling over with cows right now! Fours? Long threes? Beeves? How could we pick? We was lucky to get what we did, even with quite some few that don't show T. L. any too damned plain.

"Oh, there's over four thousand head," Williams went on; "four thousand three hundred and forty-two is what we made it when we tallied 'em in. But sufferin' snakes!"

"Uh-huh. There's steers there that looks like old Colonel Cortés in the face—bet there's a thousand head that dates back beyond the Spanish Conquest. There's yearlings here is ten years old, and the rest perportionate. Spring calves and fours and threes and laws knows what—that's one fine outfit to drive a thousand miles, huh?"

"Well," said Williams soberly, "we got to tell the boss we just made it mixed, so's 't she could suit every buyer. And damned if I don't think she could—unless'n a buyer wanted a even lot of good fours for beeves."

"Of course," assented Nabours. "If only she wasn't so hard to fool and so sot in her ways!

"Is the new chute ready?" he asked, settling back into the saddle as he uncoiled a leg from around the horn. "We've got to get 'em in the road brand."

"The boys got the wings done this morning," replied

Williams. "It won't take forever to put our Fishhook road brand over the T. L. But I'll bet a horse there's mossy horns in there'll brand as hard as a tarrypin, and calves that'll take two to hold the brand."

In a lesser flat, a couple of miles from the home corrals, new corrals and a branding chute had hurriedly been put up by the T. L. hands for the quicker process of working the trail herd. The material was mesquite posts set deep, with cross poles lashed on with hide. A nail was a thing unknown. The two men rode along the fenced lines approvingly.

"The sher'f's a cow hand, all right," said Nabours. "Just how he finds time to quit the sher'f's office is what he ain't explained, no more'n a lot of other things. But cows he does know. He's coming in now."

The rider who approached them from the farther side of the flat was not easily recognizable as the same young man who had ridden alone into the Del Sol gate a fortnight or more ago. His garb now was the loose wool of the average cattle hand of the place and day, his checkerboard trousers thrust into his bootlegs. Chaparejos he did not now wear, nor did any Saxon Texans when they could avoid it. There was at that time no standardized cowboy, nor any uniform for him. Indeed, the very name of "cowboy" was unknown on the lower range. The Del Sol ranch hands were for the most part sons of neighboring ranches, most of them lank, whiskered, taciturn young men, and for the most part seedy of apparel. They came in what garb they were able to get, and they utterly lacked uniformity, beyond the fact that each could ride, rope and brand, and all were able to live on food that would have killed men less hardy.

One of such company might have been Dan McMasters now as he plodded forward, mounted on a stout *grulla* of his own string—a blue-crane horse such as would sometimes be seen in any large remuda. He had appeared at Del Sol a week earlier than he had promised, but had forbidden the men to announce him at the house. He had lived with the cattle hands, and wished his presence to be unknown, he said, until after the herd was on its way. All for reasons which he did not declare.

He was taciturn and mysterious as ever to Jim Nabours, and the latter also grew chary of speech. Low as his own resources were, it did not wholly please him that, stacked up in two newly arrived trail wagons near the home corral, were supplies enough to run the outfit through to Abilene. It pleased him no more that if the Del Sol remuda now carried under its own road brand another brand, that brand should be the McMasters Circle Arrow, which was ranged in Gonzales County, far below. Del Sol had never borrowed, never been obliged.

"*Amigos! Caballeros!*" McMasters waved a hand as he drew near.

Del Williams looked at him in silence, nor was Nabours at first much more communicative.

"Well," he said at length, "that there bunch of cows is what we call our trail herd. I expect they'd all hold still and let us brand 'em standing. The boss don't suspect nothing but what this here herd is all select fours. Well, let her think so. Grass is up strong here, and we'll not ketch it as we move north. So let's push this

here Noah's-ark outfit into the pens and get it in the Fishhook soon's the Lord'll let us!"

"Well, we've all done our best," commented McMasters.

Nabours looked at him dourly.

"Ef we wasn't broke," said he, "you couldn't of done as much as I've let you. Anyhow I didn't take all the beans and molasses you sont up—there's half in your wagon yet, and I want you to send it back home. Besides, I won't take no wagon from you; we got our own carts, and them's good enough. Horses, now—why, yes, I'll take the loan of them, fer maybe you can sell 'em north. I don't want to hit Aberlene with a bunch of sore backs. Ef you got some horses, anywheres, why, there you are; but ef you've et up all the chuck, why, where are you? We maybe couldn't never pay that back—I don't know. So you jest send you own wagon back home while you got it."

"Well, all right," replied McMasters, slightly changing color. "You know, of course, I'm not pushing anything on you. I don't want your employer to know anything about it. And I know you-all have done your best."

"Yes, I reckon we have. We're not hardly leaving a hen wrangler at Del Sol—taking the whole force and family and most of the furniture, down to Miss Taisie's trunk. Buck Talley, our Senegambian chief, he'd of died if he hadn't got to go on as cook. Milly can drive one carreta, and old Anita don't know nothing better'n to set on the seat of a carreta and talk Spanish to them oxens. Ef we don't make Aberlene it's because there ain't no Aberlene. Here we come, forty-five hundred

cows, ef ye don't mind calling 'em that, sixteen more or less human cow hands, nineteen kinds of rifles and six-shooters, a hundred and fifteen saddle ponies and the only red-headedest boss in all Texas, which is a girl. God bless our home!

"Speaking of hair, did either of you-all ever notice Miss Taisie's sort of hair?" he demanded, suddenly turning.

McMasters made no comment. Del Williams only looked at Nabours.

"Well, you see, her hair is plumb long and plumb straight, except at the far end it curls up, like a drake's tail. You see that? You know what that means? Well, any woman that has hair like that can practice magic. I read that in a dream book oncet. Them sort is witches, and it's no manner of use trying to stop 'em. That's what the book said. Living along twenty-two year with Miss Taisie, taking out three I spent in the war, I'm here to say the book didn't tell no lie. So here we all are, sixteen fools that can't no ways help theirselves, all along of the boss having that kind of red hair that curls up on the end. Well, like you say, we all done our best. I can't look fifty horses and two wagons of grub in the mouth—not yet.

"Del, ride back and tell the boys to throw the herd all closter to the road chute. Let's get as many as we can in the iron before she gets too dark to work. We'll put half at roping and branding on the flat and the balance can work 'em through the chute."

The three turned toward the dust cloud where the main herd was held by the men. A rider was coming out, top speed.

"Hello!" began Nabours. "What's a-eating him?"

The horseman drew up his mount squatting, throwing up a hand—old Sanchez, all his life a Del Sol rider, and the only Mexican allowed to go with the trail herd.

"Pronto, Señor Jeem!" he called. *"Los hombres—baja!"* He pointed to the herd.

"What hombres, Sanchez? What's up?"

"Los hombres—they cutta our herd!"

"Cut our herd—what's that?"

"Read-a our brand—cutta our herd. They say-a we gotta their *vacas*. They goin' take!"

"Cut our herd? On our own ground. Not none! The man don't live that's going to cut a Del Sol herd without my consent and my help. Come on!"

He set spurs, rode through the thin fringe of mesquite that made the shortest path.

"Come on, McMasters!" he called across his shoulder. "I want you for witness here!"

But as he and his two riders burst free and spurred down the slope to where the great herd was made he looked back, not hearing hoof beats. McMasters was not with them.

"I'll be damned!"

Nabours smothered the remainder of a volley of hot-headed oaths. He did not understand a man who sidestepped when he was needed.

CHAPTER VII

THE HERD CUTTERS

NABOURS, Del Williams and old Sanchez spurred down the saucerlike flat in which the Del Sol herd was held. They arrived none too soon.

A party of six strangers, all armed, were engaged in argument with as many of the Del Sol men, who had ridden between them and the edge of the herd. The plunging of the horses and the loud voices began to make the wild cattle uneasy. Other riders were doing all they could to hold the herd from a run, which might have been precisely what the intruders desired. Their leader, a heavy-set, dark-bearded, handsomely dressed man, spurred out to meet Nabours, who came straight in and with no ceremony jerked his mount almost against him.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" he demanded angrily. The stranger coolly turned.

"Since you ride up and ask," rejoined he, "we're cowmen, and we want our property."

"You're no cowman!" hotly retorted the old foreman. "Else you wouldn't be hollering and riding around the aidge of another man's herd. What you trying to do—start our cattle back in the brush again? Your property be damned! Get on away from the aidge of our herd while you got time!"

The numbers of the Del Sol riders, thus increased and led by a determined man, impressed the brusque stranger; but he did not lack assurance.

"You buck the law, friend?" said he. "I've got certified records of eight brands, and powers of attorney from the owners to comb any herd going off this range. We're taking no chances."

"You're taking damned long chances if you keep one more minute where you're at," remarked Jim Nabours. "Git back now, if you want to talk this over!"

He spurred between the strangers and the herd, threw the weight of his horse against the nearest rider, his eye never leaving the leader's eye, and his hand always ready. His men followed him, pushing straight into the others. Any second a half dozen men might have been killed.

"Come on, boys!" called the bearded leader suddenly. "Pull off till I tell this fellow what's what."

They reined off, confused, a hundred yards or so one side; but Nabours clung against his man, knee to knee.

"You can't tell us nothing!" said he. "You can't cut a critter out of this herd! You can't look at ary brand we got! You savvy?"

"I savvy you're running a right high blaze, neighbor. You reckon you're above the law?"

"Damn the law! The law ain't got in here yet. Ef it had, our range wouldn't of been skinned by a lot of low-down thieves that wasn't above robbing a girl when her own men was away. I've knowed all this year that our range was skinned. What cows we got we need. We're a-going to trail 'em all north, jest like they lay, and no outfit's going to cut that herd, law or no law.

'Tain't no cow thieves is going to work over a brand in our herd, or even look at one."

"You can't hang that on me! Cow thieves?"

"I do hang it on you, and it goes! You look like a cow thief to me, and act like one. You come from Austin, but you never was raised in Texas. Pull out or we'll work you over, and do it the old way!"

The two bands, about equal in numbers—for the bulk of the Del Sol men dared not leave the held herd—now faced each other, roughly divided by a line constantly changing as the horses shifted and plunged. Every man was armed. The insult had been passed. The smile on Nabours' lined face, showing his snarling white teeth, the scowl on the face of the other partisan meant now only maneuvering for the first break. None of the stern-faced group thought of anything else. Eye watched hand. Revolvers lay itching and corded nerves were taut above them. Each man waited for the break.

The thunder of hoofs coming down the slope at their rear made a new factor. Jim Nabours dared not lift an eye to see who or what it was. He had to watch the other man's eye, his hand. But the voice of old Sanchez rose, calling to the newcomers.

"Pronto, capitan! Vien aqui, pronto! Pronto!"

The intruders whirled, not daring to begin an encounter with new assailants at their rear. The crisis was broken.

Now Nabours saw five men, splendidly armed and mounted, who swept on, spurring. They wore the riding-garb of the newly reorganized Texas Rangers, that strange constabulary of the border soon to make

more history of their own. A beardless boy, apparently their lieutenant, led them now.

"Hands up, you men!" commanded he.

The five men were halted in line, their perfectly broken mounts steady. A repeating carbine of the new Spencer type was in the hands of each, and each of the five had a man covered, his rifle leveled from his own waist.

"Sanchez, throw their guns on the ground!" ordered Nabours suddenly. The young lieutenant nodded.

"Don't move, any of you, or we'll have to shoot."

Quietly he sat his motionless horse while the old Mexican, dismounting, walked to each saddle of the herd cutters and, drawing out each rifle, threw it and the man's pistols in a heap on the ground.

"What does this mean?" demanded the burly leader of the invaders, still blustering. "We're here peaceable. We've broke no law. We're only after our own property that these men are about to drive out of the country."

"Back to Austin!" replied the armed youth tersely. "If there's a court left worth the name I'm going to get justice for you some time, Mr. Rudabaugh."

"What on earth do you mean by that?" rejoined the ruffian. "We got papers to take up cows in these brands. Looky here. Don't you never think you can hold up a state officer of Texas! I'll have you damned rangers disbanded!"

"All right," replied the youngster. "We ain't disbanded yet."

"But look here!"

The leader produced from the long tin case at his

cantle a series of papers purporting to be brand descriptions and authorizations. The impassive young lieutenant shuffled them through, his rifle across his saddle.

"Yes?" said he. "Brands? What brands? Gonzales County? How old is the Six Slash E in Gonzales?"

"Twelve years," asserted the chief of the interlopers.

"You're a liar, Mister Treasurer," smiled the boy. "There isn't and never was any such brand in Gonzales. I think your names are forged. What are you doing in here, so far south?"

The partisan showed a sudden perturbation in his eyes.

"Well, who are you?" he demanded. "You seem to know mighty much for a upstart. I tell you, I'll have you and your robbers all disbanded!"

"Never mind! I just happened to meet up with these other boys. You ride along as far as Austin and rest your hat there a while. We'll see what the court says, if there are any courts now. You've worked this range long enough and close enough."

The youth never lost his calm.

"You'll wish you'd never pulled this sort of play with me!" flared Rudabaugh. "I've got friends——"

"Yes, the state treasurer does have friends. Don't you steal enough that way, in your river-improvement ring and your other deals, without coming away south to rob a girl? What grudge you got against her or against her family? I wouldn't let you cut that herd if I knowed it was full of brands besides the T. L."

"You're getting out of your depth now, young fellow," sneered Rudabaugh. "What's more, this is Cald-

well and not Gonzales. You got no right to arrest anybody here."

"As a state Ranger I shore have. I'm nastier to run on than any carpetbag sheriff that tallies in at Austin.

"Take them in, boys," he concluded. "Work the old *ley fuga* if they break—but they're damned cowards and will go quiet. Just make them ride in front.

"That's the horse!" he added to one of his men as he rode apart and looked down on the dusty ground. "Shoe off, right front, and hoof split. They was plumb up to the gate of Del Sol."

"Yes, and we'll get our cows yet," exclaimed Rudabaugh savagely, as a ranger nodded to old Sanchez, who now deftly bound each man's feet together under his horse's belly with a Spanish knot that bid fair to stay set.

"So?" The young rider's smile was pleasant. "Now, how'd you all like to have back your guns and an even break, you to begin right now to cut that Del Sol herd?"

"I know there's cows in that herd that ain't in the T. L. Brand."

"Well, they'll all be in our road brand before sundown two days," cut in Jim Nabours now. "You lying, low-down dog, I wish to God these boys hadn't came! There's only one way to handle people like you. Git out of jail—and come back! That's all we hope.

"McCullough, do you want any more men?" he added.

"Why?" The youth laughed and rode away. "Fall in there, prisoners!" he commanded. "Ride for the ferry trail. I wouldn't try to ride too fast."

"Oh, we'll be back!" called the gang captain, defiant still.

"I certainly do hope you will!" replied Nabours fervently. "I'll come all the way back from Aberlene, ef I ever get there, just to be around here when you-all do come!"

A chorus of jeers and curses came back from the prisoners. The Rangers said never a word, but herded their men on ahead.

Jim Nabours jerked up his mount—a sign to the herd riders, and the latter swung away, glad enough to have the herd still under control. The animals began to edge out, to thin, to spread, to graze. Old Jim Nabours rode to the edge, singing a song of his own, as he sometimes did when especially wrathful:

"Bud Dunk, he was a Ranger, a Ranger of renown,
But says he to the cashier when he ride into the town.
Says he, 'I need some money that the bank here owes to me.
So please to make it plenty, fer I'm broke ez I kin be——'"

A scattering chorus came to him, roared out of the rising dust cloud:

"Oh, please, sir, make it plenty, fer we're broke ez we kin be!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FISHHOOK

"CUSS take the law!" fumed old Jim Nabours. "I never seen nothing but trouble come out of law. Ef it wouldn't of been for them Ranger boys we'd of killed Rudabaugh and his outfit right here, and that'd of ended the whole business. Courts? They own the courts; they'll all be out and at it again inside a week. Ef they meet up with us again I shore hope there won't be no Rangers. When come it a cowman can't take care of his own cows?

"But come on, now, Del, push 'em over to the new pens; we got to work this Noah's ark right now."

Nabours and Dell Williams slowly edged out a string of cattle, making a point. Swing men rode gently somewhat farther back; others pushed in the stragglers. Quietly, efficiently, with the long skill of men who all their lives had "savvied cows," they broke the compact mass into a long-strung-out line, traveling quietly in the direction laid out by the leaders. The herd submitted itself to guidance. All went well until they reached the raw new lines of the crude branding chute, when a few of the old mossy horns began to stare and then to roll their tails as though about to break away; but trouble finally was averted.

The swing men crowded and cut the front of the herd to one side of the others. Back of them others

A Paramount Picture. *North of 36.*

"HM, WE'VE GOT TO DRIVE OUR HERDS NORTH. IT'S OUR ONLY SALVATION," DECLARES TABOR.

began to circle the long procession. In a few moments two herds were made on the flat near the branding pens. In half an hour three irons of the Fishhook road brand, made by Buck the cook, were getting cherry heat in the fire near the chute. Men pushed a thin line of animals out of the smaller bunch, heading them for the fences. Once in the wings, they were crowded into the V till a row of a dozen or twenty stood in single file back of the rising gate. Then, amid swaying that strained the rawhide lashings of the new fence, and to the chorus of bawls of the creatures as the hot irons sizzled into their hides, the Fishhook began to appear above the T. L. holding and owner's brand.

"Tally one T. L. four! Two T. L. four! One T. L. yearling! One T. L. yearling! One T. L. two!" Sometimes a man would grin as he came back to the fire. "This here T. L. is the only thing I kin see on ary cow so fur!" quoth Len Hersey, top hand. "Ef it wasn't put on right good we kin fix it some with a runnin' iron. Keep about two straights in the fire."

"Tally one three!" came a voice. "Say, Del, this here Fishhook is the plumb catchin'est road brand ary feller ever did see! Does my eyes deceive me?"

Laughter and jests, dust, noise, lowings and groanings, the clack and clatter of cattle moved into the wings, the smell of the herd blending with the odor of singed hair—all the old-time flavor of cattle work in the open—went on now, the thin wedge of tail-twisting, surly brutes pushed out of the chute gate increasing steadily. The nucleus of the Del Sol trail herd grew steadily, until finally the red sun fell below the distant screen of the live-oak groves.

"She pops!" said Del Williams.

"Shore she pops!" assented Nabours. "We'll get the boss up a herd if we have to make 'em out of red dirt, way God made old Uncle Adam!

"Hello!" he added. "There's the boss a-coming!"

Indeed, through the dust, wind-carried up the flat, there showed the white feet and front of Blancocito. Taisie Lockhart, again in her range clothing, stained and worn, her hair once more clubbed between her shoulders with a shoe string, rode up soberly, trotting close to the pens.

"How are you, Jim?" said she. "How are you all, men? Where've you been three days back?"

Jim Nabours wiped his face on the dirty kerchief he pulled around his neck.

"Where we been, Miss Taisie?" he answered. "Why, we been strolling around with our light geetars amid the cactus, a-rounding up the finest road herd ever put up in Texas."

"But, Jim, we said maybe beeves—fours or long threes! Look yonder in the chute, man! There's two fours, that's all! The rest are twos and calves!"

"I'm Noah, ma'am," said Jim Nabours gravely. "This here, now, is my ark. Don't you come horning in. Of course, ef we do got a lot of she-stuff and mixed ages along of the others, how could we help it? Reckon it's cheaper to iron 'em when you got 'em, ain't it?"

"But you're ironing everything, and all in the road brand, calves and all!"

"Ma'am," said Jim Nabours solemnly, "ef we wasn't short of hands I'd shore fire the segundo, Del Williams. He's the onthoughtedest man I ever did see. Now look

what he done, him being in a dream! I expect he done run our iron on a dozen or so that ain't beeves a-tall! And it won't come off in the wash! Now, how can we get it off? Miss Taisie, as the daughter of the best cowman Texas ever seen, what would you segest fer me to do with Del?"

The girl turned aside to hide a smile that made her cheek dimple.

"Well, I've got a pair of eyes," said she.

"Shore you have, Miss Taisie, and fine ones, too. I wish they was different. But any good cowman has got to have two kinds of a eye—one to tell a brand fur as he can see a critter and t'other not to see no brand that he don't want to see. Now you go on back to the house, Miss Taisie, and leave us alone, and we'll turn in up to Aberlene, ef there is ary such place, with the damnedest, evenest, finest bunch of beeves you ever seen, every one in the T. L. and Fishhook, and all of 'em yores. God bless our home!"

He flicked at the white stripe on Blancocito's hips with the end of his own bridle rein; whereat Blancocito sprang a dozen feet to one side—but Taisie with him, not at all concerned.

"Don't, Jim," she protested. "You always treat me like a child."

"Well, ain't you?" replied Jim. "Shore you'll be the richest child in Texas six months from now."

The girl reined over to where her faithful adjutant stood, led him one side. Her face was troubled.

"Jim ——" she began.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Jim, what's wrong around Del Sol? Something's wrong!"

"What is it, Miss Taisie?"

She drew yet closer.

"Some one's been around the house."

"What? What's that?"

"Some one's been in the house! I don't know just when. You know my little old trunk—I mean the Spanish-leather box with the big hinges?"

"Why, yes, ma'am. I seen it a hundred times in the front room—seen it just the other day."

"It was in the front room. It isn't there now."

"What? What you telling me, Miss Taisie?"

"It's gone! I missed it to-day."

"What all was in it?"

"Some things of my mother's; laces, you know, a silver comb, pictures—and some clothes. That's almost all, except a lot of old papers. There were bundles and bundles of my father's old land scrip. He was always buying it, as you know; no one could stop him. He said it would be worth something some day."

"Miss Taisie, he said right! He told me that land would be worth five dollars a acre in Texas some day; maybe even ten. He said a beef four'd bring twelve dollars here on the Texas range. He said he was going to buy land, all he could get, at five cents a acre, while he could. And he'd of got a heap more in his pasture if he'd lived. And his trunk of scrip——"

"By my mother's grave!"—the girl rose to her full height in her stirrups, in a sudden tempest of wrath, her right hand high above her head—"I swear I'll make the drive for him—and her! I swear if I ever find the thief

that came in my house I'll live for my family's revenge, and for that alone!

"Jim, they're robbing us! I know that herd! Do you think I'm blind! Don't I know cows? Yon's the leavings, the trimmings, of the Del Sol range! All right! We'll drive the leavings. My word and my life for it, I'll be only a man now till all these things are squared! Will you stand by me?"

"You ort'n to ask, Miss Taisie."

"Jim, now listen! I want every corner of the bunk house searched, every tent, every wagon, ever jacal, before we start north. If we find the box we'll know what to do."

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAIL

AN EMPIRE in embryo lay threading out vein filaments, insentient, antenatal—Texas, not having an identity, not yet born, but soon to be a world. What a world! How rich a world!

Above, for two thousand miles, nigh a thousand miles right-angled across the needle's path, swept another unknown world, the Great West of America, marked till now only by big-game trails and pony paths and wagon tracks. The road to Oregon was by then won. The iron rails that very year bound California to the Union. But nothing bound Texas to the Union. Unknown, discredited, aloof, a measureless wilderness herself, she did not know of the wilderness above her, and until now had cared nothing for it.

In this central part of the great, varied state the grasses grew tall, the undergrowth along the streams was rank. The live oaks were gigantic, standing sometimes in great groves, always hung with gray Spanish moss. Among and beyond these lay vast glades, prairies, unfenced pastures for countless game and countless cows. It was a land of sunshine and of plenty.

A cool haze, almost a mist, lay before dawn on the prairie lands. Now, when morning came on the Del Sol range, a sea of wide horns moved above the tall grass. With comfortable groans the bedded herd arose one by

one, in groups, by scores and hundreds, stretching backs and tails. The night riders ceased their circles, the cattle began to spread out slowly, away from the bed ground, a little eminence covered with good dry grass and free of hillocks, holes and stones, chosen by men who knew the natural preferences of kine.

A clatter of hoofs came as the young night herd—the boy Cinquo Centavos, vastly proud of his late promotion—drove up his remuda to the rope corral. A blue smoke rose where the cook pushed mesquite brands together again. It was morning on the range. Aye, and it was morning of a new, great day for unknown Texas and the unknown West that lay waiting far above her.

The two great trails—that running east and west, that running north and south—now were about to approach and to meet at a great crossroads, the greatest and most epochal crossroads the world has even seen. Here was the vague beginning of a road soon to be bold and plain; almost as soon to be forgotten.

Slow and tousled, men and boys kicked out of the cotton quilts which had made their scant covering, each taking from under his saddle pillow the heavy gun and such hat as he had. Few had need to hunt for boots, for most had slept in them. Bearded, hard, rude, unbrushed, they made a wild group when they stumped up to the morning fire, where each squatted on one knee while using tin cup and tin plate. Cutlery was scanty, but each man had some sort of knife. Sugar there was none, but a heavy black molasses did for sweetening to the coffee, which itself largely was made of parched grain. A vessel of great red beans had been hidden in the hot ashes overnight; there was plenty of bacon

aswim in the pans for spearing; and of corn pones, baked before the fire, many lay about. Of this provender Buck, the negro cook, made them all free by his call to "Come an' git it!" Of the regular chuck wagon of the well-appointed later trail outfits, of the rough but better abundance, there was no more than faint prophecy here in the rude high-wheeled Mexican cart. In truth, the Del Sol outfit was poor, bitterly poor. Here was a *noli-me-tangere* assembly of truculent men whose adventure into unknown lands bordered close upon the desperate.

Of the later accepted costume of the trail and range, there was no more than indication. The hats were a dozen sorts for a dozen men. The neck scarf of each man above his collarless tow shirt was a scanty plain red bandanna, for use, not show. Spurs, saddles, bridles, boots—these things were good, for the Spanish influence lingered in Texas a generation after the "dead body of Coahuila" had been shaken off. The saddles were heavy and broad of horn, each with double cinches. The stirrups were without exception covered with heavy tapaderos. The reata at each horn was thin, of hide close braided, pliable, tough as steel. Of chaparejos, or leggings, as these men always called them, perhaps a half dozen pairs were owned by older men; the young could not afford them. Now, freed of the necessity of riding chaparral in the round-up of the herd, the leggings were cast into the cook wagon along with the ragged bed rolls. So now they stood or kneeled or squatted, coatless, collarless, unbrushed, belted and booted, without exception thin, almost without exception tall, each with his white-and-black checkered pants

in his boots, his garb light, insufficient, meager. They were poor.

But of good weaponry these men of the border were covetous. The older men had each a pair of the army Colts—cap and ball, for fixed ammunition was not yet on the range. His pistol flask, his little cleaning rod, his bag of round balls, each man guarded with more care than his less weight of coin. The rifles were nondescript as the men themselves. One man had a revolving Colt rifle, a relic of the New Mexican expedition of '42. Of the new Henry rifles, repeaters, many had found their way thus far south; and of the heavy Sharpe rifles, such as were used by Berdan's sharpshooter corps in the Civil War—with the great Minié ball and its parchment cartridge and the lever breech action—a half dozen survived. Most prized by some, execrated by others, were the Spencer repeating carbines, throwing their heavy ball with at least approximate accuracy if one could guess the distance of the shot. The Yager and the Kentucky rifle, which won Texas, now had disappeared. The first trail men had yet to wait seven years before the Winchester and the Frontier Colt ushered in the general day of fixed ammunition. The first wild cavalcades of the Texas trail certainly were unstandardized.

Of the Del Sol men, all alike were silent now. Jim Nabours, a long leg bent up, knelt over his plate on the ground. Del Williams, bearded, young, comely, sat on a cart tongue. Sanchez, old and gray, was under the cart itself. Cinquo Centavos, name and family unknown, called Sinker by his fellows, slim, eager, boyish, stood as he ate, shivering in his cottons. A reticent,

ragged, grim, unprepossessing band they made, ill matched and wild as the diverse cattle which now began to edge out from their bed ground.

Nabours, shutting his jackknife and putting it in his pocket, paused as he saw a man ride out from the cover of the mesquite. He knew him—McMasters, who had not been seen since the affair of the Rudabaugh herd cutters.

"Huh! There's Gonzales at last! He's powerful searchy about his work."

McMasters came in, the last at the fire, and was hardly welcomed. About him hung still the indefinable difference that set him apart from these whose lives were spent in the saddle, and this now had grown intensified. He was dressed as they were, but his garments fitted better, he was neater, trimmer. His eye, gray and narrow, was calm, his tongue silent as ever. A slow ease, deliberate, unhurrying, unwasting, marked his movements. Still he seemed with them, not of them, and they held their peace of him.

"I ask your pardon," he said at length to Nabours, "but you see, I'm a cow hand and a sheriff both. I had a little business overnight. I'm ready to make a hand now if I can."

"Well, we're ready to pull out," replied the foreman. "Del, didn't Sanchez tell you the two carts was ready?"

"*Si Señor,*" nodded his segundo.

"Old Milly went to bed in hern last night, to get a good start, she said," volunteered Len Hersey. "She taken her old Long Tom musket to bed with her. You see, enduring the war, Milly's husband, Tom, he done jine a Yankee nigger regiment and never did come back

home a-tall. That's how come Milly to go north—she's lookin' fer Tom. 'Ef Ah ever kotch sight'n dat nigger,' says she, 'Ah sho gwine blow out his lights fer him.' "

"Well, don't let Milly talk war too much, so's to spoil her cooking for the boss," said Nabours. "They'll make a separate camp. Put Anita on Miss Taisie's cart, for when she gets tired of the saddle Milly can ride in the cook cart."

"Is Miss Lockhart really going?" asked Dan McMasters suddenly.

"She shore is going. I told her to pull out late in the morning from the big house and follow our trail. Lord help the girl! There ain't no woman belongs on a fool trip like this here one.

"Move 'em out, boys," said he at length, quietly. "Mr. McMasters, I want you on point, with Del Williams."

And so, unemotionally, there began one of the wildest and strangest journeys ever made in any land.

Under the ancient art of handling cattle, known to each of these men, the herd began slowly to move. McMasters and Del Williams, a couple of hundred yards apart, gently threaded out the farther edge of the loosely grazing cattle, along whose flanks a dozen hands sat loose in saddle, ready to take their appointed places on swing and drag. A few old steers, rangy, tall, wild, sunburned, trotted out ahead—the natural vanguard, pacemaking, electing itself then and there, and holding place for a thousand miles. The point almost formed itself, as should be; for the art of trailing cattle was to use their instincts, not to alter them; to follow them

and not to crowd them; to let them feed and travel, and never to take a back track on the road.

Gently, intoning a comfortable bar or so now and then, the swing men spread and gently pushed additional numbers back of the front wedge. The column began to form, to stretch, loose, indefinite, not close packed, stopping, hurrying, turning to look back, lowing, no set purpose having yet been developed in the vast band. A pair of swing men, no more, must serve to control each three or four hundred head of cattle on the march.

The rangy vanguard were kept moving out, heading north, still on their own native range. Soon they struck a steady walk, in which they were encouraged.

"Roll along, little dogies! Roll along, roll along!" chanted Len Hersey, on the head swing, as the great motley herd got form.

Far at the back came the unhappy drivers of the drag —the old, the maimed, the halt and the blind, steers bowed down with weight of woe. Here were gaunt cows, heavy with young, calves newborn trotting with their dams, all in a vast pastoral hegira.

Young Cinquo Centavos, hustling his caballada together, wailed in a high thin treble. "Neeter, Neeter, Wah-a-hah-neeter, ast thy-y-y so-o-oul ef we mus' part!"

Came shuffling of hoofs, crack and creak of joints, rattling of wide horns not yet shaken down into good spacing in the march. At times the great remuda, a hundred and fifty head of saddle stock, would thunder off in a brief side break, and Cinquo must cease in his appeal to Juanita. Forsooth, to his young soul Juanita

was a tall maid, of red hair that curled up only at the ends.

In less than an hour after they first moved, the lone herd of Del Sol was made and trailed. Sinuous among the tall grasses, it rolled out and on, northbound. It made a vast historic picture, in a vast forgotten day; a day when a new world was made and peopled overnight.

Jim Nabours rode ahead of the herd as general guide and forelooper. From his place, a half mile in advance, he turned back in his saddle, looking at the long cloud of dust; the rolling sea of backs, the pale swing of wide horns above. His fierce soul exulted at the sight. He shut his teeth, his eyes gleaming, as he faced north and settled down into a plodding walk.

Ten in the morning, and the last of Del Sol's drag, little calves and all, misfits, ignorant mistakes and all, had rabbled off and away, sore under the fly-bitten road brand fresh on every hide. The dust cloud was hours old at the upper edge of the flat, when at the opposite edge, on the rim that divided the flat and the big house of Del Sol, another and lesser dust cloud appeared over the broken turf.

It was made by two rude two-wheeled carts, each drawn by a double span of oxen. The roughly spoked wheels, stiffened by slats lashed on with rawhide thongs, emitted shrieking protest at each revolution on the axle. Each carreta had a tilt of canvas stretched above its rough bows, and each had certain cargo. On the front seat of the first vehicle sat old Anita, brown and gray and wrinkled. The rear cart was handled by a vast

negro woman with a long musket at her side—Milly, as usual grumbling to herself.

These two women, old beyond love and life, doggedly loyal, passionately affectionate, made the bodyguard of Anastasie Lockhart, educated and dead-broke orphan, setting out into the world at twenty-two on one of the most impossible adventures any woman ever knew.

Just now Anastasie Lockhart, trousered, booted, gloved and hatted like some slim, curiously eye-arresting young man, rode alone on her crossbar, Blancocito. Her mass of heavy hair was down her back, burned tawnier beyond the shade of the sombrero. Her eye moody, she gazed on ahead at the procession that held every friend she had on earth and every dollar that she owned.

She dropped back and rode alongside the leading cart.

"Anita," she said, "if I only had my stolen trunk, I'd not be leaving a single thing on earth behind me!"

Anita vouchsafed nothing for a time. She understood English.

"Tronk?" said she presently. "What-a tronk, *señorita?*"

"The one that was stolen from my parlor—you know very well what one."

"That-a-tronk? He is not stole. He's back. I setta on heem now."

"What? What's that, Anita?"

"*Si, Seguro.* I gotta heem under seat, serape on top. Sanchez, my man, he bring. Las' night he got heem back."

"The lost trunk? Where? Where did he find it?"

"Sanchez, he look in waggone, he look in corral. In

one waggone, come from Gonzales, he find-a thees-a tronk. Sanchez, he tak-a heem and put-a heem in here. You like-a heem, dose tronk?"

The hand of Anastasie Lockhart fell lax at her saddle horn.

"Anita, tell me, was it in his wagon—Mr. McMasters', the Gonzales wagon that went back yesterday? Was it in the wagon of Señor McMasters, the sheriff of Gonzales?"

"Oh, si!"

"Ah!" A long sighing breath.

"Vamenos!" exclaimed Anastasie Lockhart after a long time. She looked straight forward, not turning, as one who left a used-out world behind.

CHAPTER X

IN DAYS OF OLD

"WE got 'em going!" called Jim Nabours, riding back to his men. "Keep 'em moving! Push 'em hard for the first day, so's they'll be tired and sleep good. Look at them long shanks walk! I'll bet that old dun coaster that's done elected hisself head leader has got horns six feet acrost, and ef he's ten year old he's a hunderd. Well, anyhow, he's on his way north. *And-a-lay,* old Alamo!"

"He knows about as much where he's going as we do," said Del Williams, whom he had addressed.

"Shore he does, and more. I come from Uvalde, where it's plumb wild. I was raised on squirrel and corn pone, and all the learning I got was out the little old blue-back speller. But my pap done told me that since Texas taken most of the earth away from Mayheeco, Uncle Sam, he's had about six government surveys made a-trying and a-trying to find whereat is the one hundredth meridian, and likewise how far north is 36-30, so's they can tell where Texas stops at. They can't not one of them people agree even with hisself where either of them places is at. Them surveyors don't know no more'n that claybank steer. Trail? There ain't no trail. We're lost from the first jump, unless'n that steer knows. There wasn't never no Chisholm Trail nowheres, and I can whip any man says

there was. I didn't read of no such thing in the blue-back speller. But I allow, give me a good North Star and a dun steer, I kin find Aberlene ef there is ary such place."

"Oh, we'll find a trail," replied the younger man. "I'm telling you, there is a trace called the Chisholm Trail north of the Red River. You can get to Baxter Springs that way, or to Little Rock, and I reckon to Wichita; and Aberlene's north of Wichita somewheres. There's grass and water all the way through."

"All trails is alike to a cow man," assented Nabours. "My pap said all trails was begun by horse thiefs. My pap come west into Texas from Louisianny. He come over the Trammel Trace, from the prairies west. Injuns made that, but it didn't get nowheres. Injuns, horse thiefs, whisky peddlers—I reckon that's about how the cow trails started. What they call the Chisholm Trail runs up to the Arbuckle Mountains. That's where we'll hit the reservation Indians. They'll all want beef—and whisky.

"There's a road up from Santone to San Marcos and Austin, so I reckon we'll head up Plum Creek and strike in north over Cedar and Onion. Ef there is a trail we'll find it. Ef there ain't we'll make one. Foller that dun steer—he knows where Aberlene is at."

Wheeling and riding far at one side of the scattered herd, the foreman rode to the rear, where the cows and calves were straggling on. His drag on that side met him—Sid Collins, flap-hatted, tobacco-stained.

"Corporal," said he, "we got more cows now'n what we had at breakfast. They'd ought to be riding mostly on a rawhide under the cook wagon, but that nigger

says if we put ary 'nother calf in his cart he's gwine fer to quit right now. Milly's so big she fill up the hull carreter; and besides, old Sanchez and Aniter has got it plumb full of chickens."

"Calfs, huh? Well, now, that somehow hadn't seem to come to my mind none, about calfs. How many new ones you got?"

"Six. Not big enough to brand, but big enough to bawl. An' we got six cows on the prod, follerin' the cook cart, so's the cook he's afraid to git offen the seat. Ef this here now keep up, we'll have half the herd in the cook cart and the other half follerin', lookin' for war. I most hatter shoot one cow right now. We got to hold the remuda way back. Miss Taisie's behind that, even, with the other cart."

"Tell Miss Taisie to ride front, where she belongs on her own cows, son."

"I segest that, but she won't," said the troubled cow hand.

"Does she know who's riding point?"

"Shore! I told her."

"And she wouldn't come?"

"No."

Nabours shut his lips grimly; then, as usual when in trouble, broke out into song: "Oh, granny, will yore dog bite, dog bite, dog bite? Granny, will yore dog bite, dog bite me?"

"Leave me shoot all them calfs, Mr. Nabours," urged Sid Collins. "They kain't walk, an' they ain't wuth a damn. Then the cows'd behave."

"It's what we shore orto do," agreed Nabours. "They hold up the herd. But we need every critter we

got. Maybe we'll find somebody to trade 'em to fer something."

"Why don't we cut back all the she-stuff an' on'y drive steers, Mr. Jim?"

"Because ef we left a cow or a calf on Del Sol this spring, by fall neither'd be on our range. As well as clean it and let it take a chance as have thieves do it for us. No, ef our calfs die, I'm going to die 'em as fur north as I can. Yes, and ef ary one of 'em dies I'm going to run the T. L. iron on him after he dies—and, yes, the Fishhook road brand over that—so's 't the buzzards'll know whose stock they're a-eating of! My good Lord! . . . Oh, granny, will yore dog bite, dog bite——"

He rode on back, through the thinning dust. The two carts were still a mile behind. He could see the white-band horse ridden by the mistress of Del Sol.

There were sixteen men on the T. L. herd. Sixteen loved Taisie Lockhart in sixteen ways, save for the one element of fiercely reverent loyalty. This grizzled old foreman loved her as his child. His brows narrowed, his grim mouth shut tight under the graying beard as he approached the slender figure which came on, facing her great road into the unknown.

"Push on up, Miss Taisie," called Nabours. "Yore place is at the head. We'll see nothing hurts ye."

"I don't want to ride front," replied the girl. "You've got men enough there. Who's riding point besides Del?"

"Mr. Dan McMasters is on left point, Miss Lockhart," said Jim Nabours quietly.

"Oh!"

"Well, he's been over the road north, anyways—the onliest one of us has. He's a cowman. So fur, I taken him fer a square man. Not that I care a damn fer a hand's morerls. He may be a horse thief, but jest so he don't steal from us I don't care."

"Suppose a hand did steal from us."

"I never did hear of no such thing!"

"Jim, listen! I've found my trunk."

"No! Where at?"

"Sanchez found it in the—well, the McMasters wagon that went back to Gonzales this morning. We've got it in our cart now."

Nabours looked far out over the gray and green of the landscape a long time before he ventured speech. His face then was sad.

"I've knowed men shot for less," said he at length. "But are you sure? Do you know who done it?"

"I haven't seen anything. I only know what Sanchez says. None of my men stole the trunk. It meant nothing to them. The land scrip in it might some day mean a fortune to a man who did know about such things; and he did know it was there; and he did say that there'd be a boom in land and cows in Texas in less than ten years, maybe five.

"Well, we Lockharts always did open our doors. We thought the world was honest!—It's hard for me to doubt—to doubt—him."

Downcast, she rode on. It was long before Nabours made comment.

"Miss Taisie," said he at last, "there can't no man rob you and get away with it. Us men won't have it. After supper I'll be back at yore camp. I'll have with

me my left-point man. I'll have besides my segundo and Sanchez and six of the best hands of Del Sol."

"What do you mean to do, Jim?"

"Mean to do? You ast that, and you a cowman, and daughter of one? I mean to hold a court, that's what I mean to do. What us fellows decides is right is what'll happen. It'll happen soon."

"But, Jim"—the girl was suddenly pale—"we'd have to take any—any suspected man to Austin. And he's a sheriff himself!"

"Austin be damned, ma'am! Likewise, sher'f be damned! Del Sol runs her own laws. That man's father and yores was friends—until the war. Then they wasn't so much, maybe. Calvin McMasters was a Yankee sympathizer. We don't know it wasn't him that killed yore father. But there can't no man rob Burleson Lockhart's girl and get by with it!

"We'll try him fair," he added. "I'd never of believed it. This shore does hurt."

"It hurts, Jim. He was our visitor. Did he eat—with you boys?"

"He shore et. We taken him in. He done broke the one law of this country."

CHAPTER XI

THE COURT ON THE TRAIL

THE sun swung low. Nabours rode back, addressing his point men impersonally. "We bed on the slope, yon. Let 'em water full."

As the cattle quenched their thirst the men quietly pressed them to the left of the route, urging them one side, blocking further progress. The half-wild cattle seemed to know that here, on high, smooth ground, breeze-swept and dry, with good mattress not only of new but old grass, they could get a good night's lodging. They grazed, slowed down, and the men held them till they should bed down for sleep. Over four thousand cattle, of all ages—too large and too mixed a body for good trailing—now were by way of forming good trail habits.

But Nabours left the herd and spoke a time with Del Williams, five other men of his oldest. Together they rode to where Dan McMasters sat his horse, idly watching the cattle in the cool of evening. They rode so silently, so grimly, that a shadow of menace must have lain before them. Without a word the tall, slender figure whirled his horse to front them. Like a rattler, he always was on guard. His elbows nearly level with his hips, his two hands touched his guns.

"Yes, gentlemen?" McMasters spoke quietly.

"Better drop the guns," said Nabours, also unagitated. "There's six of us."

"There's twelve of me," said Dan McMasters evenly. "You wanted me?"

"Yes. Drop yore guns on the ground."

"Don't any of you make a move," was the other's reply to this. "I don't know what you mean." Both guns were out.

"We came to arrest you, for trial, to-night, now. That's my duty."

"Nabours," said McMasters, slowly, at last, "I ought to kill you for that. But I've got to have this clear."

"Give up your guns and stand fair trial. We'll make it clear."

"No man lives who shall touch my guns. But who brings charge against Dan McMasters, sheriff and ranger and deputy marshal of the United States? What sort of mean joke is this?"

"It's Miss Taisie Lockhart brings the charge," said Nabours.

The young man flinched as though struck.

"What charge?"

"Theft; stealing from a friend; stealing from folks that has fed you."

Slowly the black muzzles drooped. With a movement as deliberate as their withdrawal had been swift, McMasters thrust both guns into their scabbards, unbuckled his belt and hung it over his saddle horn.

"Has she sent for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'll come." McMasters spoke as though with difficulty.

Nabours pointed to a little fire whose smoke arose at the edge of a clump of cover a quarter of a mile away; a small tent, two white-topped carts making an individual encampment, apart from the trail cook's mess. Without a word the accused man, his head slightly dropped forward, rode toward the fire, both hands on the pommel of his saddle, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Anastasie Lockhart came from her little tent at the call of Nabours. Her hands suddenly were clasped at her throat as she saw the tall figure among these other stern-faced men. It was too late for her now to reason, to withdraw her charge.

"We bring in the man," announced Nabours. "You are the judge. We'll hear what he has to say."

A strange, inscrutable quality was one of the singular characteristics of Dan McMasters. His face was a coldly serene mask now as he stood beside his horse, looking straight at the tall girl who stood, woman in spite of her man's garb, her men's surroundings. If any emotion could be traced on his face it was a shade of pity, of great patience. Concern for his personal safety seemed not to be in his mind. This indifference to danger, this calm, did not lack effect. The men who guarded him suddenly wished they were well out of it.

"I a judge? No! I've nothing to say," Taisie choked.

"Yes, you have had something to say, and you done said it to me," rejoined Nabours. "You started something and you got to go through with it. Set down there on that bed roll. You got to tell us all what you

told me. As owner of this herd, you're the main judge. There can't nobody shirk no right and no duty here.

"Set down here, prisoner. It seems to me you'd orto give up your weapons to the court."

"I'll give Miss Lockhart anything on earth but my guns," said McMasters evenly. "No one touches them but me."

"I reckon no man here is scared to do what he's got to do," remarked Nabours simply.

McMasters made no reply. He never had a hand far from his revolvers. He seated himself now so that he could face all his accusers, flat on the ground. His buckled pistol belt lay over one leg. An exact observer must have noted that the toe of one boot rested inside the farther end of the buckled belt, so that proper resistance would be offered in case their owner should snatch at the butts of the heavy guns, both of which were turned ready for convenient grasp. So he sat, facing the jury, facing his Portia—facing what was a far worse thing than death itself to any man of honor.

They were a jury of his peers, as nearly as might be, though he had had no hand in their selection. Had he known all the histories of these men he might have challenged for cause Del Williams, trail segundo, who rode right point. He had heard a man or two pass a rude joke or so, although he did not know that as Del Sol ranch hand Del Williams, ten years her senior, had known Burleson Lockhart's daughter from her infancy. The way of Del Williams' love was silence and reverence. But Del Williams was of some chivalric strain. That now was to be proved. That his most dangerous rival was this prisoner he knew perfectly

well by the primal instincts of man; and now came a certain test.

"Del," began Nabours, turning to his lieutenant as next in authority, "tell us what you know about this man since he come to our house."

"I don't know anything at all," answered Williams slowly. "Ef I did I wouldn't tell it."

His thin, brown-bearded face was set in quiet resolution. Talebearer he would not be. His fellows looked at him stolidly.

"Ma'am," went on the prosecutor, "you told me yore trunk was stole out of yore parlor. It had papers in it—land scrip, God knows how many sections."

"Yes, I missed the trunk." Taisie was very pale, her voice a whisper.

"Mr. Dan McMasters, did you ever see that trunk? I hate to ask you."

"Oh, yes; I did."

"What was in it?"

"I don't know. It was open, close to me, where I sat in the parlor. I saw some lace, some women's gloves, or mitts. I didn't look again."

"Did you see it after that?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

"Near the gate—outside the gate, in the edge of the brush. I thought it odd it should be there. I was sure I'd seen it up at the house, the only time I was in the house. You were there."

"Shore I was! She said all her father's land scrip was in that box; we all said it'd be worth money some

day to any cowman. You heard it. You knowed where the trunk was and what was in it."

"Yes; so did you."

"Then why did you put it in your wagon that was going back to Gonzales."

"I did not. That is either a mistake or a lie."

"But it was there. Sanchez found it there. He taken it and put it in Anita's carreta. It's there now. We declare that to you. It was missing from the house. It was found in yore wagon. Yore wagon was going back home. That was right where some men was laying up in the brush when you left. You didn't let me foller them. You didn't show up when them same men —we proved by the split-hoof track—was trying to cut our herd. Only the Rangers saved that. Ef you're a Ranger, why wasn't you there?"

"I'll not have any man ask me such questions."

"Don't tell us what you'll have or won't have. You'll have what we give you, no more, no less. Explain how come that trunk in your wagon. Not a man on Del Sol except you and me knowed what was in it or where it was. Now who done put it in yore wagon? It looked right easy to sneak that south while we was going north, huh? And it with half a million acres in it."

"How come him to bring ary wagon up here anyhow?" demanded Cal Taney, a top rider on Del Sol.

"I wouldn't ask him that," said Del Williams quietly.

"But I do"—retorted Nabours.

"Well, I had some supplies, you know," answered McMasters. "A wagon goes better than a cart. You said you didn't want my wagon."

"A wagon carries trunks or boxes better."

"Yes."

"Shore! Was you planning fer a load both ways—what you'd kerry in a wagon from Del Sol?"

"You may guess," said McMasters, suddenly dull red. "Most of you have guessed."

"We have!" asserted Nabours. "Miss Taisie, ma'am"—he turned to the white-faced girl—"this here is hard for you. Del won't talk and won't vote. The rest of us thinks the trunk and wagon is not explained. Am I right, men?"

Four men nodded. Del Williams, gentleman in rags, sat staring straight ahead. The gray eyes of Dan McMasters were fixed on the pale face of the woman whom now he knew he had loved since first he saw her, would always love. What price?

"We're the jury, ma'am," said Nabours. "You're the judge. It looks to us like all along the McMasterses was Yankee sympathizers. It looks like this man, after all, was standing in with his own kind of politics at Austin. That explains a lot of things that's been going on. Rangers? Arrest them folks? Huh! I'll bet they won't stay in jail two days! You'll have to say sentence on this man we-all thought was square, thought was our friend, a square Texan and a good man. What shall it be?"

Taisie Lockhart, Portia, spoke not of the quality of mercy. Instead, she bowed her head in her hands and wept without reserve. That act utterly changed the whole complexion of the trial.

Dan McMasters threw up a hand—his left hand. An instant later he was on his feet, but his attitude had no hostility.

"Wait, men!" he commanded. "Don't move, any of you! I'll pronounce sentence on myself!

"Of course, I don't recognize any trial or any court here—I came myself. But some men do fool things. You'd like enough say death or banishment. All right! Let it be banishment! You haven't proved more than a suspicion. I'll accept banishment and leave the herd quietly now—not taking anything but what I have now, here."

His face hardened into gray marble.

"If Miss Lockhart has had one suspicion in her mind that I—that I'd—well, touch anything of hers, or of any other human being's, then it's plain enough I don't belong here. I can't square that for her. She can never square that with me.

"I'm going now!"

There was no hand or voice raised at this. Turning his back on them for the first time, McMasters swung his belt to place, buckled it, caught his saddle horn and was mounted and away, not looking back. He rode gently, easily, straight. They knew no more of him now than they had before.

"Del! Del, call him back!" broke out Taisie Lockhart. But Del Williams shook his head. "I wish I could, Miss Taisie," said he simply. "I don't reckon any of us could now."

"It had to be," said Nabours after a time. "I'll pay him back after we sell our herd. Del Sol can't have no obligations to him now. But he's one of the mysteriousest men ever crossed this range. He's cold, that man. He needs watching."

"Pay him back? What do you mean, Jim?" Taisie

was still in open tears. But she got no reply from her foreman.

"He's a killer, Jim," broke in Cal Taney. "We know his ree-cord. He's done killed five or six men a'ready, young as he is—four since he was sher'f and not countin' Mexicans. He's bad, that feller."

"He never killed no man as sher'f that didn't resist comin' along," ventured Del Williams. "Them two other men—one was coming at him with a ax, on the buffalo range, and t'other had a even break on the street o'Uvalde. But no man has a chance with him on a even break."

"He's cold," reiterated Nabours, hesitant. But he suddenly was agonized over the discharge of what he had held duty to his owner—the hardest duty he had ever known.

"Good thing fer us he was cold," said Del Williams. "He'd never have went out alone if things had popped loose. He kep' his mind and his hand to hisself. Why?"

But he knew why.

Taisie Lockhart, alone in her encampment except for her serving women, threw herself face down on her blankets. A black and ominous world surrounded her. She knew that yonder man, riding away into the twilight, never would come back to her.

"Get your night horses staked, men," ordered Nabours gruffly, after the return to the encampment.

Against a wagon wheel old Sanchez dreamily thrummed a guitar. Sitting on his bed roll, a little apart in the dusk, Cinquo Centavos, for the time off remuda watch, engaged in song. His face was turned toward a certain star, above a certain remote camp fire, a

quarter of a mile away. He thought his voice might carry so far. He was fourteen, and very, very much in love. His voice quavered and roared and broke.

"Neeter, Wah-hah-ha-neeter, ast thy s-o-oul ef we-e-e mus' pa-a-art!"

"Damn you, kid, shut up!" called the voice of the foreman. "We got troubles enough."

CHAPTER XII

THE COW HUNTERS

AT midnight the tired herd, after the strange fashion of cattle, rose almost as with one impulse and began slightly to straggle before lying down on the other side. The four men then on the watch, slowly riding two in each direction of the round of the massed cattle, did not redouble their monotonous crooning—time out of mind a range custom in handling cows—but kept their spaces, knowing the herd would soon again resume its rest. No unusual sight or sound alarmed them. As Len Hersey said to Del Williams, they handled sweet so far. The last watch saw the herd rise for the morning, not yet beginning to feed, standing, stretching. The cook began duties of the day, grumbling to himself.

By now, without a word, the wrinkled Anita was gathering bits of fuel, starting a tiny practicable blaze, and groans could be heard from black Milly, still in her cart, complaining of her misery. Frugal, but better than the fare of these others who now moved here and there between the tent and the massed brown blur of the herd, was the breakfast for the owner of Del Sol.

The sun still was young when Nabours, moody, morose, finished his snatched breakfast, got into saddle and resumed his lead. Len Hersey was moved up to the left point now. He and Del Williams dribbled the

A Paramount Picture.

TAISIE INVITES THE MYSTERIOUS Mc MASTERS IN.

North of 36.

thin forward edge of the loosely grazing cattle into line. Without crowding, stopping, grazing, advancing, the cattle again began to trail.

No man mentioned the incidents of the night before.

"Roll erlong, little dogies! Roll erlong!" intoned light-hearted Len. "I don't give a damn where we're goin,' but we're a-travelin'!

"Say, Del," he resumed, "did you see that night kid when he fotch in the remuder this mornin'? He ain't got no coat, no slicker, and on'y one shirt, and his pants is right wore out now. He was shiverin' like a monkey in a rain."

"Did he holler?" asked Del.

"No, not oncet. And he lay his string on a new horse and when he clim him the damn bronc he begin high, wide and lonesome. But the kid sets him. 'I allus take a pitcher fust off, cool mornin's,' says he, 'along of it's bein' so warmin'.' "

"Sinker'll make a cow hand," rejoined his companion. "He ain't no bigger fool than the rest of us."

Back on the line of the great herd the swing men were edging the cattle in. At the rear the two unhappy drags were again in argument with the cook. With the latter, old Sanchez agreed every new calf should be shot and abandoned. Cal Taney opposed this.

"Tain't fer you, boy, to say what you'll do er won't do. None o' yore difference ef we pile calfs on yore damn kyart tell their airs sweep the groun'. I reckon afore us all gits to Aberlene we'll have morn'n four thousand newborned calfs—straight hundred per cent. An' ever' one o' 'em is a-goin' to ride under or on top o' yore ole kyart. You better engage in prayer, nigger."

It was again high and hot noon. The herd had fed and walked a half-dozen miles, and now some had lain down in the shade of a live-oak fringe. Nabours, scouting ahead, for an instant paused. Turning, he came back at speed to his point men.

"Throw 'em off!" he called. "Hold 'em on this flat! There's a big herd ahead coming down from the west. We don't want to get mixed in."

"Who is it?" demanded Del Williams. "Somebody ahead of us, going north?"

"Kin savvy. No wagon in sight, and a right loose drive. I'll go back."

He met the leader of the new herd, who was riding to meet him; a tall, loose-clad man of aquiline features. He was perhaps thirty-six years of age, and of a certain gay assurance, as his laughing eye declared. His beard, pointing down to his breast, was dark and glossy. Even in his rags he did not lack in jauntiness.

"How, *amigo!*" Nabours pulled up.

"*Caballero!*" rejoined the other, grinning and extending a brown and sinewy hand. "My name's Dalhart, from Uvalde. Which way?"

"North," said Nabours; and no more.

"You got a trail herd?"

"*Si, Señor.* Fustest and damnedest ever went out o' Caldwell."

"What's your brand?"

"T. L.—we're Del Sol people; old Colonel Lockhart."

"Shore, I know you! Well, you'll want to cut our herd, for we got plenty o' yore cows."

"So?"

"*Si, Señor.* You see, we're a cow-huntin' outfit—

on spec. We been out around seven months. Started at the Nueces Cañon and worked north and west clean almost into the Staked Plains. We cleared the Concho and was over almost fur as the Pecos. We sold some cows in yore brand to a outfit going to Sumner, and 'll account fer them on our tally—less, say a dollar a head for findin'. What they was doin' clean over in west away from home and off their range you'll have to say, fer I don't know. What we got now in the T. L. we picked up mostly on the Double Mountain Fork. You know as well as me they don't belong in there, and how they got there is something I kain't figure. But we shore got three-four hundred o' T. L. fours."

"I need 'em," said Nabours.

"There's others from even as fur north as Palo Pinto. All north and west o' where they belong at. What pushed 'em west?"

"Friend," said Jim Nabours, "you're a cowman. The truth is, Del Sol, and maybe more, has been reg'lar skinned for two years. The push has been up and west, toward the Llano. There's been a big steal going on. It looks like some big fellers was planning to stock that open range as soon as the Comanches is got out of there."

"How you figger that? And which way you headed now yoreself?"

"You ever heard of Aberlene?"

"No; what is it?"

"It's the head of the railroad. A three-dollar steer here is wuth five-ten-fifteen-eighteen dollars up yon—we don't know how much. The news has just came down. I'm trying to drive up the last leavings of our

cows—Miss Taisie Lockhart's cows, to make a little stake for her. We've been skinned by the gang at Austin ever sence the war. What we know we can't always prove. I'm talking to a cowman. . . . How many men is in yore outfit?" he concluded.

"Only six of us. We got pack horses, travel light. But of all the antigodlin' bunches o' cows off their range—I couldn't tell you how many!

"You see, us fellers don't skin or drive to the coast canneries. We just turn in any brands we get, and folks usual pays us a dollar a head—er promises to. I reckon we've picked up two-three thousand head. Lots get loose in the thickets; we ain't strong enough to hold 'em.

"And so you're drivin' for Miss Taisie Lockhart? I've heard of her, clean down home. Orphant, huh?"

Nabours nodded.

"Yes; and the damnedest whitest, squarest, worst-robbed orphant in Texas. I'm shamed to show my herd to a cowman, fer it's the sorriest I ever seen. Now, I want them fours, all you can spare of 'em. I'll trade you in cows just come in with calfs; I can't get them on north. Seems to me like a million cows, now, every one of 'em, he taken this perticler time fer to bring a nice spotted calf inter the world when he ain't wanted."

Dalhart, the cow hunter, hooked a leg around his saddle horn, and Nabours went on:

"You take them cows, and calfs, right now, and throw 'em back on Del Sol, just below, and I'll take what fours and long threes you can spare. When we get back next fall, ef we ever do, I'll set 'em in yore brand or vent 'em to any one you say, and I'll credit you fifty

cents on each trade inside our own brand, or a dollar if you'd rather have cash then. I'm playing her wide open. Ef we bust on this drive anybody can have Del Sol—corral, house, cows, calfs and all. I just don't want to be bothered with fresh she-stuff right now, that's all. As for money—friend, we ain't got none."

"Nor nobody."

"You know you said it! That's why this Del Sol herd's important. We allow to bring back money. We'll settle then, and pay you a dollar a head fer fours, damn glad, fer they was lost off the earth so fur as we all was concerned. Well, you boys done swung over the whole north and west of Texas? That's the biggest rodeo on spec I ever hearn."

"Not so much money," said the other. "We started twelve strong, all good men. One was killed by a horse. Four was killed by Comanches. It was one fight after another on the old Comanche road. We could only bring through the leavin's, too, like yourself.

"Now, what you say is fair. We'll throw your she-stuff back fer you—hit ain't fur and they'll go back easy. Take what T. L. stuff we got rounded up—and anything else you like. Comes to a orphant, no cowman in Texas is going to ast to look at yore herd."

"One bunch has," said Nabours. "Some day I got one or two scores to settle. But till I get back from Aberlene on the railroad, I got neither time ner money. Mr. Dalhart, our outfit's broke! We're eating borrowed corn meal and hog meat, and borrowed where I wish to God it wasn't. Our remuda ain't all our own And as fer our brand, I'll bet you, outside the Fishhook road brand, there ain't hardly ary two head alike. I

been liberal. Please, sir, don't comb our herd, because it'll make you dizzy. She's a orphant."

Dalhart nodded.

"I know. No man shall ride into yore herd, least of all us. Take what you want out of our stray rodeo. Ef you get back, settle with us fellers any way you like. Down in Uvalde we know of Taisie Lockhart. Ain't a Texan but says hit's a damn shame the way her father was a-sassinated. Since the war, there ain't no law and no jestice in all Texas no more. Hit's eena'most each fer hisself, and no pay fer nothing. But orphants!"

"And like her!" said Jim Nabours.

"Is she perty as she's said fer to be?" smiled Dalhart.

"More! Come and see!"

"How?"

"She's three miles below, in our outfit."

"You're not lettin' her go up the trail!"

"Where else'd she go? She's broke, and a reg'lar organized gang working out her last head! What elset could she do? Come back. We'll talk things over."

When they sighted the scattered Del Sol herd, its riders sitting loose, some of the men asleep in the saddle, the little pair of white carts made first objective for Nabours and his new-found friend.

The latter was not prepared for the vision of the tall young girl who rode out to meet them. Somber of eye, grave, sad, Anastasie Lockhart could no more deny her youth, her beauty, her heredity, her education, than she could negate the strong round figure, the clear skin and the mass of ruddy hair which first impressed

this observer, not easily abashed, who now cast down his bridle rein and advanced on foot to meet her, broken hat in hand.

"Miss Lockhart, this is Mr. Dalhart, of Uvalde," began Nabours. "He's just above, with a rodeo of mixed stuff. He's been on a cow hunt. He's done found cows. I was purposing a few things. We come down to talk it over."

Taisie Lockhart held out her hand in shy, stiff fashion that little comported with her inches or her masculine garb.

"I'm shore pleased to meet you, Miss Lockhart," said the newcomer. He stood, a wild but not uncouth figure, a typical border man of that fierce and self-reliant land. "We have heard of Miss Lockhart as fur south as Uvalde," he added.

When Taisie smiled, a small dimple, very feminine, quite often appeared on her left cheek. This now unsettled Dalhart's reason utterly.

Nabours now briefly outlined the proposition of trading cows for beeves and making the herd more suitable for the trail. Taisie Lockhart nodded soberly, by no means ignorant of cows and cow methods.

"But now," broke in Nabours presently, "Miss Taisie, I'll have to get a new hand somehow, out of Mr. Dalhart's outfit."

"Yes? We—we lost one, sir." Taisie's voice was unsteady.

The cow hunter was, so it seemed, a simple man of direct habits.

"I rid down, Miss Lockhart," said he, "to ast fer the job. Would ye take me? I kin ride and rope."

His eyes, brown, direct, unabashed, looked fair and square into the dark eyes of Taisie Lockhart. She spread out her hands at length, with words of assent which might have had a double meaning:

"One more man? Very well."

CHAPTER XIII

"BRING AN IRON!"

THE cow hunter lost little time in settling down to work in his new capacity. He had initiative, seemed masterful, independent.

"Let me bring two or three of my boys down and help you-all throw back a lot of these cows and calfs. I'll leave couple boys to hold our stuff. Come on up again and look it over."

They rode together until they reached the edge of the wild range herd—literally the loot of a land untenanted—animals wild as buffalo. Nabours gave the herd the quick glance of the practiced cowman.

"Yore stuff's fatter'n ours," said he; "yet you've driv further."

"Shore," replied the other. "We've been on a eight-hundred-mile circle, like enough. Way out west, it's high and dry, and the vine mesquite grass, or the grama north o' that, curls down like nigger wool. There's cows here been raised on vine mesquite, fat as Christmas ducks right now.

"I hearn tell that away fur up north, thousand miles er so, they got bunch grass and buffler grass that fats cows the same way; though, o' course, no cow critter could live through them winters up north."

"Shore not—nor no man, neither, I reckon."

"Well, now, here's the layout," resumed Dalhart,

"Here's two-three thousand to pick from. As I said, you'll find plenty T. L.'s. We got maybe three hunderd slicks here and there, fer ourselves. Ef we got a dollar a head straight through we'd be rich on the hunt. Yet beeves at Sumner and north o' there is fotchin' fifteen a head and up'ards."

"Ef we got half that at the railroad my boss'd be rich on one drive," said Jim Nabours. "Then we'd have money enough to locate the gang that's been pushing stuff off this range. I don't think we'll need to scrape Austin very damn deep."

"I ain't sayin'," replied the cow hunter quietly. "Now what I segest is that you-all cut yore light stuff and let our boys throw it back on yore range. Take out'n our herd as many head o' good fours and drive 'em all north under the Fishhook, T. L.'s and all the rest. When you sell allow us a dollar a head for findin' and tradin'. Does that sound fair?"

"More'n such," said Jim Nabours. "This first herd is a expeariment for all of us. Let's get the girl on her feet fer sake of her father. And him oncet rich!" he added. "As square a cowman as ever crossed leather. I tell you, that bunch of shorthorns that's come into Austin done him dirt. Politics, that's what's under it—Reconstruction politics. They think they can steal this state because they win the war. Reconstruction? I'll bet one thing, ef I ever lay eye on the man that's been riding our range I'll take him apart so's't he'll be damned hard ever to reconstruck again!"

Now in the glare and heat and dust of the frank Southern spring days, two dozen lank, lithe riders split the two great herds, combed them both, blended them

both. Nabours' face began to lighten as he saw forming a real trail herd of marketable beeves and mature cows. Of the unknown potential market at the rails he really knew nothing. It might demand beef and might ask stocking cattle. The discards of each herd, the yearlings, the cows with calves, the lame and halt, were to be cut back south for the later distribution on their own home ranges.

The whole enterprise in which these two pastoral chiefs now by chance were engaged was one of a day now gone by forever, and it was conducted under standards not understandable to-day. There was no law but range custom. Texas was but thirty years this side the time when twenty enormous land grants, given to Americans, had covered practically all of her vast territory. No scale of cattle values ever had been known. On a strip of twenty-five miles here, not that many miles from the capital of the state, now were assembled almost ten thousand head of cattle. Had a buyer from the North appeared he could have bought the lot at three dollars and a half the head, and at the tally-out he would as a matter of course have been asked to accept the count as it ran, dogies, cows and ancient steers, head for head. In those days a cow was a cow. All horned kine, of any age or sex, were cows.

Again, as to the question of ownership, the gesture of the day was alike close and hard, or large and lenient. No man argued with his neighbor, since a cow was only a cow. A man gave his cloak also to his neighbor if asked—though woe to the man who laid hand on coat, uninvited!

In the herd of these wild-cow gatherers were many

unbranded cattle—their own now by virtue of discovery, the custom being "finders, keepers," as to an unmarked animal. For the mixed lot of the branded strays from widely scattered herds a dollar a head seemed then a fair pay for finding and herding for a hundred miles or more. The adventurers who had taken on this speculation of saddle and rope had rather considered a dollar a head profit than range the find into the second year—after which the increase of the strays would be their own without possible contest. And a dollar a head, payable perhaps next fall, was a thing large and golden to the eye of the bearded, half-clad fighting men who now, with no plan on their own part, had uncovered a large plane of contact of the old with the new, of the late past with a new and crowding present. But for both parties, cow hunters and trail drivers, it was all a speculation. The country north of them was an unknown land. No values yet were established either here or there. The West was yet in embryo.

But all the time, as Nabours and Dalhart, respective leaders, rode at their work, their wonder increased at what each learned from the other. Some malign intelligence, outrunning the apathy of the South in the post-bellum period, had worked on more than a local horizon. There had been a general pushing of the range product into unsettled West Texas, as far as the Comanches would admit. The trail to the Pecos River, up which cattle had been driven to Army posts, the pioneer work of Loving and Goodnight, the casual Western drives of the half-breed Jesse Chisholm to the Pecos crossing, must have been watched and known

by certain powerful groups of the new and avid carpet-bag politicians then crowding South.

That a covert range ring was working in Austin—as a beef ring later was to work in Washington—as well as a river-improvements ring which was hastening to sell or take over all the state lands at a few cents the acre; and that this sinister gang of far-sighted and unscrupulous men had visions of a day of a vast empire of their own, stocked with cattle which had cost no more than the stealing, branding and driving, could then be no more than suspected by Nabours or Dalhart. But both men were shrewd. Both knew wild ways and wild lands, and both knew cows, though neither had any real vision as to the swift future of cows. They knew that crooked work had been going on, of so large and so vicious an extent as to violate all the ancient and sacred law of custom, as well as the written law. Both men were sober as they rode at their work.

"And to think," said the old foreman of Del Sol. "they wouldn't spare even a girl like her!"

Dalhart, lean and bearded adventurer in cows, nodded.

"But there ain't none like her!"

Nabours paused for a time.

"You been on our string three hours."

"Three hours is enough, *amigo*. Three minutes was enough. I've never knowed such a woman could ever be in all the world."

"There's others think so."

"I'm sorry for them."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to marry that girl ef hit's the lastest thing I do."

"Others nas told me such," replied Jim Nabours, not so much concerned. "It's right funny about women. Now, I tried for all my early life to marry a girl down in San Felipe. I done right well, and was going to ast her; but another man done married her first. All right, he done it fair, and I didn't kick. I set down to wait him out, and shore enough, he done die in about ten year and she was a widder. I begin to save up enough to git me new spurs and hat and saddle blankets, and allow to begin courting of Sarah right after branding time—and damn me, ef a Dutch colonist don't up and marry her afore I git around to it! He last four year, and Sam Doan shot him one day over around Round Rock. I was in debt to Sam fer that, fer now Sarah was a widder oncet more.

"This time I didn't lose no time. I rid over and told Sarah how it laid. 'Why, law!' says she. 'Why Jim, I never knowed you choose to marry me, er of course I'd of married you rather'n ary one of them others! Why didn't you say so?'

"'Well, I say so now,' says I. 'Even ef I'm crowding forty-eight, I say so.'

"So we done set the day. And right then the war bust in our face and I rid off to the war. I sort of forgot to git married to Sarah, in the excitement. Well, when I come back I was apast fifty, and broke. When I came to look things up I find Sarah has married a Arkansaw widower with eight children over on the Brazos!

"That settled me with women. The game's too damn rapid fer a man like me."

"Well, it ain't going to be too rapid fer me."

"No? Now look here! Let me ast you something—and let me tell you something. I ast you—likewise I tell you.

"I'm that girl's maw. I realize how much she owes every man on these both two herds right now, but I allow that the real men in this outfit has got to think of her cows and not her—first, last and all the time, till the said cows is sold.

"You willing to take left point on them grounds and with that understanding? No love making on this trail—not a damned word! Besides, you'll tell me who you are, after we get done driving and settle down to courting?"

His keen eye sought that of Dalhart, whose own met it as fearlessly.

"It's a trade!" said he. "I'll keep my word on that."

"Well, that's settled. Now, let's set off the branding gangs. We got to get at least four hunderd of these fours in the Fishhook before night day after to-morrow. That'll keep us all from making love, I reckon. Blest be the tie that binds! But you're a T. L. hand now, and not no more'n that. You got a naturalized citizen's right to love the boss, but you ain't reached no years of majority ner discretion this side of Aberlene."

Jim Nabours rode back in the twilight and flung off from a foam-streaked horse at Taisie's fire. The tall girl came and seated herself beside him on a bed roll, a hand laid on his knee.

"What's wrong now?"

His quick eye noted her paleness. He knew she had been weeping. A large gnarled brown hand of his

own stroked gently the slender brown hand on his knee.

"Why, Miss Taisie, ain't nothing wrong, I'd say. Fact is, everything is too damned right, that's all."

He went on to tell her of the developments of the day; how more than richly their exchange of discards for beeves was working out; how well the herd was developing. Then he came to what was on his mind.

"Now, see here, Miss Taisie," he went on, breaking a bit of bark between his fingers, "when we started out we thought we had stripped the Del Sol range. We taken all ages. Only a act of God could of kept us from having a plumb thousand calfs riding in yore carts. But now looky here! We're going to cut back all that stuff and throw in fours instead. The cut is going back to Del Sol. But who's going to take care of Del Sol while we go north?"

"Well, who could?"

"You could. Yes, Miss Taisie, you! We can git along damn well without you, and Del Sol can't get along alone. Don't you think you'd be safer back home that way than what you will be going north up to the sixth princerpul meridjun with sixteen pirates and God knows what kind of weather?

"You're only a girl, Miss Taisie—the damnedest finest girl ever borned in Texas; but girls is girls. I can handle cows, Miss Taisie. I can't handle girls. You go on back home, please ma'am. We'll pull in afore Thanksgiving with a wagonload of Yankee money."

The girl straightened up.

"I'll not go back! I closed the doors when I started

up the trail. How could I live there alone?"

"I ain't ast you to live there alone. What I say is, we'll be inside of ten miles of Austin when we cross the Colorado. I want you and Del to ride in to Austin and get married. Then I want you both to take charge of this cut and ride on back to Del Sol."

The old man turned his gray grim eye to her.

"Can't you leave me be yore maw, Taisie, child?"

"No—no—no, Jim!" Both her hands were on his. "Don't ask me! I've nothing to live for outside of what's here on the ground. Everything I own I've got with me, and all my friends. No, Jim, I'm going through. No use to argue—no use to argue, Jim!"

"I reckon not, ma'am," said the old foreman, sighing. "All I say is, God ha' mercy, that's all! I got a dream there's going to be hell on this herd."

So was the genesis of Anastasie Lockhart, cow hand. To-morrow came a creature who rode unconscious of the horse beneath her, scornful of heat and dust as any of these dust-screened figures, scarf over mouth, legs clinging, body rhythmic, hands swift at the test moment; a creature of incredible fascination, with all the velocity and vitality of youth and strength. And before her, seeking respite of her in violent activities, passed vague, flitting, heroic figures, each of whom rode his best for her—and each of whom eke left to the tears of the recording angel crimes in cattle brands they would have lost a hand before committing for their own gain or that of any man.

A vast picture, and a noble, that of the remaking of

the Del Sol trail herd. A shrouded yellow sun, hot and again hot. The dulled green of a landscape of timber and grass, of hill and valley, a wild land even then, though under the eaves of the state's capitol; a land partly settled here, but tenanted under no real acceptance of a social compact. Eager, early, primeval it was—all. Youth of the world!

A tossing sea of wide-pointed horns, overhung with a cloud of dust. Rattling and clacking inside the dust. Rock of Ages; Jesus, Lover; Home, Sweet Home, where lean riders held the mill. And always, cutting through the cloud, one remorseless rider after another edged his chosen victim out for the final rush and the relentless sweep of the thin hide rope. Over and over again, more than five hundred times before that cut was done—twenty times, twenty-five in an hour, counting them all—the little Southern horses sat down and quarter-faced their quarry, each taking his own weight and more in one wrench at his saddle horn and saddle cinches, his gleaming eyes noting the hurled horned creature, his victim also, at the other end of the rope.

Calls of "Bring an iron!" And men sweating at a half dozen fires were ready for that. Till his trembling sides could no longer hold his great heart's purpose, each savage little horse went back into the dust under a savage man. Two ropes for the heavy steers, two sweating horses; twenty-five brands run in an hour, perhaps—a task for four days done in two.

A vast and splendid picture, and of a great day. Since then two million men and women have mated thereabouts. Yet now, center of that picture—and its

cause—there passed, hour after hour, gray, dusty, flitting, tireless, the unmistakable and unconcealable figure of a young woman. . . . Yes, a creature of incredible vitality and velocity, of life and youth.

Youth of the world!

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE ERRAND

DAN McMASTERS, sheriff of Gonzales and captain of state Rangers, rode into the straggling village of Austin, capital of a state so large a horseman could not cross it in a month. He bore no outward evidence of having passed through any agitating scenes. His apparel evinced no sign of disorder, his face was coldly emotionless as ever. He might have been almost any tall and well-clothed young man. One thing only set him apart from the usual visitor: By virtue of his calling he wore his two heavy six-shooters. The handle of the left-hand gun pointed forward; that of the right-hand weapon to the rear—a puzzling combination to any student of possibilities. Granted that he was a left-handed man, which hand would first seek a weapon? Or if right-handed, which? That was a problem which, lacking time, some half dozen men had never solved to their own success.

A certain red-faced, gray-haired and rather rotund individual active in the office of the treasurer of the commonwealth of Texas, sitting before a low-topped desk in a room of the building which served as state capitol, looked up as the newcomer entered.

"Good evening, sir," said McMasters pleasantly. "Do I find Mr. Rudabaugh in?"

The official made no immediate response.

"You do not," said he finally.

"No? I infer that he is out of town?"

"Yes," rejoined the other.

McMasters smiled innocently.

"In such case he is no longer in jail?"

At this the official displayed feeling.

"What business is it of yours?" he demanded. "And how do you know he is in jail? He didn't stay there longer than it took to call court. There are not people enough in Texas to keep Mr. Rudabaugh in jail."

"I heard that a deputy United States marshal took him and his party the other day, below the Colorado, and sent him in with a force of Rangers. As you say, it might have been supposed that no court in this town would hold him."

The red-faced official abated somewhat of his pompousness.

"From what I've heard in description, I believe you are Mr. McMasters, sheriff of Gonzales," said he presently.

"I am that same, sir," replied McMasters smilingly. "If I needed to quote Davy Crockett, I might say that I have the closest shooting rifle and the best coon dog in the whole state of Texas. Yes, I'm McMasters of Gonzales."

"Well," began the other, embarrassed, "it's only right to tell you that at the preliminary hearing all those men were discharged."

"That is why I called. I wanted to talk things over with Mr. Rudabaugh. I thought I might be able to

explain one or two things to him. I thought maybe I might be of some use to him."

Silence of the other, now afraid to speak.

"Where can I find Mr. Rudabaugh?" The quiet voice took a new note.

"That I can't answer. He left town again yesterday morning, with some other gentlemen. They headed west."

"It looks as though Mr. Rudabaugh thinks I still am after him. Perhaps he has been mistaken about my motives and purposes with him. Perhaps he forgets that my father voted and worked against slavery, the same as the gentlemen of your party did. Why antagonize Gonzales? Why fight the Rangers?

"Now, what I want to tell Mr. Rudabaugh is this: I know where that trunk of Texas land scrip is to-day. I am ready to tell him where it is."

The official coughed, embarrassed.

"That was what he wanted to get hold of at Del Sol. Well, I got hold of it myself. I know where it is to-day. I can take him to it at any time he likes. Does that sound interesting?"

The red-faced man sat up.

"It sounds strange, coming from you!"

"Well, there are times when it's hard to get the truth. I never found much use in showing all my own hand in public. A peace officer has to be careful. Perhaps the state treasurer has misunderstood me. Perhaps I am willing to work with him for a little time, and not against him. How then?"

"Mr. Rudabaugh and his associates, too, have been

very much misunderstood by the people of Texas," began the state official. "He is a man of large ideas, a man of vision. Our friends of the other party prefer to see Texas remain as she always has been—remote, impoverished, with no commercial outlook, no hope on earth. Mr. Rudabaugh sees a wider future for Texas. We all do here." He spoke virtuously.

"Precisely! Well, I'm one of the growing number of Texans who'd agree with him on that last. We don't deny that there are chances in land and cows such as we never dreamed. The men who work fast in Texas now will be rich—as rich as they like. But we can't always climb up on the housetop and tell all the world about the means and methods. Of course, that means that some may misunderstand such men as Mr. Rudabaugh. You know that?"

"Why, yes, of course; I know the way Mr. Rudabaugh himself works—always decisive, never telling much of his plans. His friends deplore the criticism he has received in certain quarters."

"Yes, he has occasion to be cautious. Still, if Mr. Rudabaugh, not as state treasurer but as president of a certain land-and-cattle company, has any wish to confer with the man who saw him arrested the other day, when he was inquiring about a certain block of additional land scrip, that man is willing to talk with him now. We might find something of mutual interest. You-all here in Austin might do worse than make friends down Gonzales way."

McMasters smiiingly waved a hand at either gun.

"I'm not quite alone. We will both have to come

under a white flag. If he wants to be *muy amigo,* maybe I can be of service to him."

His gray eyes, now narrowed, were fixed without wavering upon those of this other man.

"Tell me, where is Sim Rudabaugh!" he demanded suddenly. The man behind the desk started as though under an immediate menace.

"Well, since you seem to offer your aid, Mr. McMasters, in a misunderstanding—a very deplorable misunderstanding—I presume I may tell you. He's gone north, up the trail, toward the Brazos. He's on some private business of his own."

"Yes? He's in camp, waiting for the big Del Sol herd? Where is his camp?"

The desk man grew very uneasy; but at length he replied hesitantly: "Well, I'd take the trail that runs due north from San Marcos if I had to find him. I would say he might be camped a ride of a day and a half north of here—say, thirty to fifty miles north, on the general road to Fort Worth village.

"You don't know where that herd is, do you?" he added. "Mr. Rudabaugh regards its going north as a very grave mistake; indeed, a risky and ruinous thing for the state at just this time. You don't know where the herd is now?"

"Yes, I do know. I've just come from it. It's been held up a few days in west of here. They may get over the Colorado by to-day. I ought to be able to find Mr. Rudabaugh well in advance of the herd itself, then, you think?"

"But you didn't tell me where the scrip is." The other man flushed at seeing his eagerness noted.

"Well," said McMasters slowly, "you yourself and I myself are not supposed to know a damned thing about that chest of papers, are we? But we do, eh? Well, when we find the T. L. cows we will come pretty near finding that scrip. And scrip is going up, eh?

"Oh, I'll tell you this much, my friend. I know all about the moves of Mr. Rudabaugh's big company to get holdings west toward the edge of the Staked Plains—on the Double Mountain Fork and above there. You see? Well, I don't see why you and I should beat about the bush. I know all about the operations that have driven almost all the central range's holdings on out farther west.

"There are a lot of things I know. Well, do you think I am safe to trust? And don't you think the administration might do worse than be friendly to Gonzales and Uvalde?"

The other man drew himself up with a long sigh of doubt, apprehension, but made an attempt at merriment.

"Well," said he, "of course, this is the first time we've met. I don't know that I'd trust you to take care of me, but I believe I'd trust you to take care of yourself."

"I always have," said McMasters simply. "That's why I'm here now. Suppose you and I have a little war council, eh?"

When McMasters walked his horse down the long street of Austin town, rifle under leg, he looked neither to the right nor to the left, though well aware of the scrutiny which followed him from more than one door and window. The reputation of the mysterious, always restless sheriff of Gonzales, captain of the newly revived state constabulary, was one that reached beyond the

confines of his own county. No one had looked for him in Austin—to the contrary. But then, as one man said to a neighbor, McMasters, of Gonzales, could always be counted on to be doing some unaccountable thing.

CHAPTER XV

NORTHWARD HO!

THE reconstructed and augmented Del Sol herd passed on northward steadily, as though impelled by some cosmic force. It had required well-nigh a week to cut the two herds and blend them into one, for handling heavy beeves in the open is vastly different from the work of the corral and branding chute on light cattle. At the end of the work the remuda was dragged and drooping, the men yet more taciturn. But they could look out with pride over well-nigh four thousand head of longhorns such as would make any cowman's eye brighten even in that day.

Now, daily more accustomed to the trail, the cattle shook down to the daily march. At dawn they did not feed at first; but, never urged to speed, in an hour or two would graze along, halting in the march, advancing, the concourse at times stretched out over more than a mile, perhaps a quarter that distance in width. At midday, thrown off the trail—if trail it could be called which as yet had never known a herd—they grazed well, and in that portion of the country could find water two or three times a day; so that they took on or held flesh rather than lost it.

"Did ary one of you-all ever hear how far it is to Aberlene?" asked Nabours of his new man, Dalhart,

whom he had put on point in view of his obvious education as a cowman.

"Must be e'en around about a plumb thousand miles," replied the latter. "Hope hit's thisaway all the ways—plenty of grass and the rivers full enough fer water right along. We ain't had to hunt water yet. You'd orto see the Llano! We've driv two days, out yan, with their tongues hangin' out.

"Water! When we hit the Colorado I thought we got plenty water. She'll swim a horse in a dry year, and she swum us for more'n a hundred fifty yards! I was mighty glad to ferry them carts.

"Uh-huh. Ner that ain't all—the Brazos'll do the same, and only luck'll save us from swimmin' a quarter mile, maybe, on the Red. Then beyond that's the Washita, narrer but deep. I never talked with no man that ever was north of the Chickasaws. We'll wet our saddles plenty, shore. What cows we don't drownd and the Injuns don't steal, or that don't get lost in night runs—why, that's what we'll have to sell. Four thousand's a big herd to han'le—too big—but I've gethered cows long enough to know a feller better git plenty when the chancet comes."

North of the first unbridged river—the Colorado—the advance was over a country practically new, although now subdivided into organized counties. The main thrust of the early population was from the south and lower east, so that now the farther north they got the sparser grew the infrequent settlements. All North and Northwest Texas remained *terra incognita* even for Texans, and no map of it ever had been made, let alone of the wild Indian Territory that lay north of it. The

thousands of longhorns, the first herd ever to go north from a point so far south in Texas, plodded along, never turning a backward foot, but hourly finding a new land. Austin was a county-seat town rather than a capitol city. Such communities as Temple, Waco, Cleburne, Fort Worth—all close to the ninety-eighth meridian, along which lay the general course of the first of the cattle drives before the trails moved west—were cities in embryo; Fort Worth, through which bodily the trail ran, had then not over one hundred inhabitants; enough for a metropolis in a state that had not a hundred miles of rails and no trace of a lasting market for the one great commodity—cows.

Across a half dozen counties, a dozen lesser streams, the singular procession passed onward, epochal, in an abysmal ignorance and a childlike self-confidence. Its course was due north; and since now the grass was good and water courses full, it needed to make no digressions. The herd left a trail a hundred yards wide, two hundred, half a mile; but the main road remained written plainly for any who might follow.

Nabours was cowman enough not to crowd his cattle on a march of such indefinite duration, but continually he fretted over the necessary slowness of the journey.

"It's good country," he admitted to Del Williams; "can't complain; grass all right; high enough, but not washed out; and a good creek every forty rod almost. But I never did know Texas was so big. Here we are into May, and when we make the Brazos we'll be only maybe a hunderd and fifty mile north of where we started at. It'll be anyways a hunderd years afore we

make Aberlene, ef there is any such place, which I doubt, me. Not one of us knows nothing, and nary one has ever been even up here afore. We'll just about hit the Red when she's up full."

"We ain't there yit," rejoined his new point man cheerfully. "We may all git drownded in the Brazos; an' ef we do we won't need worry none about the Red."

They had not yet lost all touch with the settlements; indeed, continually crossed the great pastures of men who under range custom held their own river fronts and range. Now and again a sort of trace led them north—the compass finger of fate always pointed north and not west for the state of the Lone Star. But of actual road there was none, fences were undreamed and bridges never yet had been held needful for traveling man. When, therefore, they struck the great Brazos, coming down as did all these upper rivers from the east rim of the mysterious Llano Estacado, it was relief to Nabours to find a pair of rough boats which he fancied he could lash together into ferriage for his troublesome carts and their timid passengers. For the herd a swimming crossing once more was necessary, and demand was made once more on the native generalship of the foreman.

"Put 'em in warm, men," he said to his men at the camp fire in a great arm of the river. "Ef a cow's warm and the sun's shining he'll take the water easy. Ef he's chilly he begins to think of home and mother. We'll rest 'em here till late to-morrer morning. The bank's highest on the south side and we can throw 'em in easy. I don't think there's more'n a hunderd yards or so of swimming, no ways."

His judgment proved good for an amateur—as all trail drovers then were. Well warmed, the herd strung into the ford amiably enough, led by the point men and pushed by the swings. The horse herd already had been crossed, for horses swim better than cattle, and have more courage at a wide crossing; and this laid down the line for the herd leaders, who went in readily enough.

The long line of the cattle, as it reached the swimming channel, was swept down stream in a deep U, but when they caught footing and made up the farther bank the line was established and the crossing went on steadily, the line never broken and not a head lost out of the great total. It went forward as though in an accustomed routine; and this first successful essay in crossing big water gave confidence to all.

All the saddle horses, including Blancocito, had to swim, and so did the yoke oxen of the carts. The owner of the herd patiently waited her turn. Old Anita crossed herself for two solid hours, sure her end had come. Milly found her relief in loud and tearful lamentations.

"What ever brung us-all 'way up yere?" she exclaimed. "My folks wuz Baptists, and so'm me; but what I says is, I done been baptized oncet and dat's plenty. I'm a notion to walk back home."

"No you won't," said the trail boss, who with his best man had come back to see to this last work. "You and Anita set right on yore cart seats. Miss Taisie'll take care of you. Ef you drownd we can get plenty better cooks, so don't you worry. Ef you did float off, you couldn't sink noways. Anita's the one in danger

—she's all bones. You set in the middle and say yore prayers like Anita does.

"Don't you worry none, ma'am," he added, addressing Taisie. "I'm going to take them two John boats somebody has left here and make a raft that's safer than a bridge."

His process gave proof of the Texan's strange distrust in all boats and confidence in all horses, although it showed no less the resourcefulness of the real explorer, crossing country with such means as lay at hand.

It was no great matter to rope the two broad-horn scows together side and side, and to lay a pole platform across to receive the carts, which were run on by hand. Remained the question of propulsion, and none of these knew aught of sail or pole or oars. This meant falling back on the *vade mecum*—the horse, without which in his day the railroads and bridges might as well never have been.

Nabours lashed his cart wheels fast to his craft, so that he could risk strain on them. Then he got a long pole, some thirty feet in length. All the time singing and whistling to himself, and vouchsafing no answer to any, he passed this across the body of the foremost cart and lashed it fast. The ends projected widely at each side.

"I got a steamboat now," said he to his followers, "but I ain't got no side paddle wheels. Ride in there, you points—Dalhart, and you, Del—you're side wheels. When you get under the ends, each of you reach up and tie yore saddle horn to the end of the pole. Then swim back yoreselfs. The horses couldn't sink ef they wanted

A Paramount Picture. *North of 36.*

"WHAT ARE YOU—FRIEND OR FOE?" DEMANDS JIM NABOURS.

to, and I don't reckon there's only one way they can swim, and that's acrost."

Theirs not to reason why, the two men obeyed, managing to get into the boat, which still lay aground, the side-wheel horses standing not over belly deep, each encouraged by its rider, who lay along the gunwale anxiously. But when at length the thing was put to the test by bodily pushing the clumsy contrivance into the current, the unique experiment proved a success. The horses, finding themselves carried off their feet, began to swim vigorously, their instinct or their intelligence leading them to head angling upstream. The result was that the craft, even thus heavily loaded, made astonishing headway; indeed, finding a landing just below the ford end established by the herd. With shouts and laughter the remaining men once more swam their horses over in the wake. The crossing, so novel that even Taisie forgot her fears, was made with expedition and in perfect safety.

"It's easy," said Jim Nabours, modestly answering the compliments of his men. "Of course, ef 'twasn't for the womenfolks we wouldn't have to bother. A feller couldn't keep house without a horse, could he? Ain't nothing a horse and a rope can't do. My horse swum me over twicet, and didn't hardly wet the saddle to the tops of the rosaderos. There ain't nothing safe as a horse, ma'am.

"Now you men go on and string 'em out"—he turned to his well-wetted associates. "They're all over and all ready to move. It's a dandy crossing. We'll bed three or four miles on, if it looks good. Feed 'em slow and

get 'em full. A full belly's the best way to handle a cow. I'll push on ahead right soon."

Just now he rode over to the moody figure that sat her reclaimed horse at the upper side of the fording trail. His face was frowning.

"Miss Taisie," said he, "one thing I've got to tell you. There ain't going to be two trail bosses on this herd. It's you or me. Now I want to say that we can't be over about thirty of forty mile from Fort Worth. I reckon you and Del can get married there, huh? Then you still could ride back home to Del Sol. I don't know what there is ahead. We ain't more'n started. I can take chances for myself, and men and my cows—but not for you!"

"Jim! Why, Jim!" She laid a hand on his soaked sleeve. "You don't think I'm a quitter, do you?"

"Lord knows I don't, ma'am! I wisht you was."

"Jim! The lone herd of Del Sol, the first out of Texas? Something big, Jim! I don't think I'll be scared any more. It wouldn't be playing square with you-all to get married and go back home. . . . Home?"

He turned quickly. Tears again were on the girl's cheeks. With a savage groan he caught the cheek strap of Blancocito and led her to the vehicles.

"You Milly, damn yore black Baptist hide, quit yore shouting and build a fire! Make some coffee for Miss Taisie. I'll tell Sinker to hold the remuda back, Miss Taisie. You-all come on up then."

Presently Cinquo Centavos rode up, shy and grinning, abashed yet happy at being appointed personal guardian of his deity. Thin, burned brown, ragged, his hat almost no hat at all, boots and saddle alone

marked him worthy to join these other men—these and his instinctive mastery of horseflesh. At sight of Milly clambering down over the cart wheel—indeed a dismaying spectacle—his mount began to plunge and pitch. The boy sat him, annoyed. Taisie waved a hand.

"Fine, Cinquo!" she called. "I like to see you ride."

The boy smiled as he jerked up the head of the horse.

"I didn't make him pitch, ma'am," said he. "He's jest done that hisself. I reckon it was the sight o' Milly's laigs. He's all right now." He dismounted.

"How are you coming on, Cinquo?" inquired his mistress. "Getting to be a regular trail man?"

"I ain't lost a head yit, ma'am," said the youth simply. "One D Slash hawse turned back this mornin,' but I crossed him. I got my hull bunch. Now we're over two-three rivers; they won't turn back now. Hawses is a heap reasonabler than cows."

"Jim says you work too hard. You don't need to be up all night on a remuda, he says—horses stick together. You don't have to watch them every minute."

"Shore they do, ma'am. You don't bed 'em and tuck 'em in like you do cows. I wouldn't be no cowman," superiorly. "Gimme two-three weeks on the trail," he added eagerly, " I wouldn't hatter watch so hard, like now. They feed against the wind, ma'am. I got the bell on that big white Del Sol mare. I allus listen which way the bell is soundin', and so I allus know where they're at: Why, sleep? I slep' most a hour last night. When I don't hear the bell I wake up. It's easy if you savvy hawses. I ain't gwine to lose nary head, to Aberlene, ma'am." He colored deeply. "I—well, I ain't, now!"

"I've got all good men, Cinquo," said his deity. "They savvy cows and savvy horses."

"Yes, ma'am." The boy's throat gulped.

"Have some coffee, Cinquo," said Taisie. "Milly, give Cinquo something to eat. He hasn't lost a head."

Seated comfortably on the ground, Cinquo grew more confident.

"Ma'am, ain't the nights han'some?" he ventured. "So bright, quiet-like. Times, I lay on the groun' by my hawse; come midnight, I kin hear the bell, and hear my hawses blow, nighest ones; er sometimes hear the cows grunt and blow, too, bellies full and right contented. So all the world's kind o' happy-like. And the stars is so fine, ma'am! Don't you think so? Like glass, they air. Seems like God must'a'busted a winderpane and slammed the pieces right up agin the sky, and they stuck there, shinin' like they was wet."

"Yes, Cinquo. So you've noticed the stars too?"

"Then we both do!" he exulted. His young, shy eyes shone. Indeed, he was her knight, ready to risk all in her honor. So were his nights borne, sleepless in ardor and reverence.

"Stahs!" broke in Milly. "Stahs! They's common! I know whaffur I go Nawth—I gwine to git me a apple! Onliest apple I ever done et," she explained, "were what Sher'f McMasters gimme. He taken it out'n his saddle pocket and said would I eat it? 'Mister Sher'f,' says I, 'what setch a thing like disher cost now?' says I. 'Oh, it mout 'a' costed fifty cents,' says he, ' 'cludin' of freight.' 'Huh,' says I, 'ef it cost fifty cent, I reckon Ah gwine to stahve on, stahve on!' But some time, ef ever I git Nawth, and ever I git whah apples is at, an'

ain't nobody a-lookin'—u-m-m—huh! Now, Mr. Dan McMasters, he sayed——"

"Go get my horse, Cinquo!" broke in Taisie Lockhart imperatively. "Milly, pack the dishes. Come, we must get on!"

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE NIGHT

THAT night the stars, indeed, almost tallied with Cinquo's description in their pointed brilliances. The wind was nothing now, the silence, save for a few quavering coyotes, was deep and full of peace. Contentment sat on the wild bivouac. On a gentle slope well-nigh four thousand cattle were lying close packed in a vast oval, less than a fifth of a mile in extent, half that distance across on the lesser axis. Bedded on high, dry grass, in the path of the breeze, themselves full of grass and water, they lay, heads high, level with their cover, blowing and chewing, eyes closed and happy.

The fire points of the cook's evening meal now barely showed. Afar came the faint sound of men's voices, singing—the night watch riding slowly, two men in one direction, two in the opposite, fifty feet or so back from the bedded animals. These latter in some vague way knew they were protected. They lay and grunted dully, having ended one more day of their march toward fate.

"Ain't that enough to make a cowman happy?" said Nabours to Del Williams, nodding toward the herd as they lolled by the fading fire. "You couldn't kick 'em up."

"We ain't started yet, Jim," said the young Texan.

"How come we ain't? It couldn't be much over four hunderd mile to Red River Station from Del Sol. Them cows is plumb gentle already.

"I'm going to roll in, Del. You and Dalhart better go on at midnight, I reckon. Watch the Dipper."

Afar, at the established distance from the watchers, the tiny fire at Taisie's tent fell flickering into absorption by the night. Taisie lay, wide-eyed, looking out through the tent front at the myriad-pointed sky. She told herself that it was the coffee taken late, but she knew that was not why she did not sleep. Or, if she slept, she wakened always with the picture before her of a ring of men, one facing her, his eyes calm, although he was being tried on the point of honor dearest to any man. It was worse than trying him for his life, she knew that. Had she, Portia, *provocateur général,* judge, jury, been just?

Restless, confined by the oppression of the tent, Taisie drew her blankets beyond the flaps and tried the open air. Came the stertorous sounds of Milly's sleep, the cough of the few animals picketed near by. She raised on elbow and looked to the tiny row of brush, piled as windbreak by old Sanchez. He and his wife Anita always slept so, with one scant serape above them. But they slept. She could not sleep.

She raised higher on her elbow, looked up at a sudden sound. Blancocito was standing, ears pointed toward the fringe of mesquite that flanked their little eminence. He had flung up his head, snorting. She turned, would have risen, for she was a fearless soul and reared on the border. Could it be Indians?

At that instant she felt a powerful hand close over

her mouth. An arm forced her to the ground. She looked up into the face of a man! He was a tall man, a strong man. Suddenly she ceased struggling. She knew what man this was!

But why, as he crouched beside her, holding her down, stifling her voice, did he, too, look with eyes fixed where those of the plunging horse just had been, toward the edge of the thicket?

"Hush!" She heard his voice, though he kept his head up. "Don't call out! Where is the little trunk? Have you got it?"

She nodded, under his stifling hand, or would have done so.

"You thief!" she tried to say. "Oh, God curse you!" For now she felt her sentence had been just. "Oh, you thief!" she said, or thought she said.

But though again she writhed and tried to call, no sound came save the hard whistling of her nostrils, coveting air.

Then she almost tore free—did tear free. Crouching almost over her, his body above hers, one hand holding her down, suddenly she saw him go to one knee, saw a move of his free arm. Her eardrums were almost shattered by a double explosion just above her head. He had fired at something in the dark.

Came medley of night alarm—horses snorting, men calling. Taisie's senses could give no sequence to all the varied sounds. She caught the rush of hoofs toward the mesquite, thought that her horse had been stolen; heard a man's scream in the night, where she supposed the thief had shot one of her own men.

But concurrently she heard another sound, one which

terrified every man who also heard it—the rumble and thunder of four thousand cattle, wakened by vague terror.

The sounds of shots in the night were not usual, not understood by them, hence ominous of ill. Jumping to their feet, addled by the slumber in their eyes, their tails high and rolling, their horns rattling, the herd by instinct turned in the direction opposite the sounds of terror. Then, swayed by the one blind instinct left to them, they broke.

Two of the night watch, caught by the storm of horns, were pushed away, barely keeping ahead in the night. The dreaded run was on. In the night was no peace at all. No, nor peace in this girl's soul.

With the first burst of the herd every man in the camp was on his feet and hurrying for his night horse. Each knew what to do. There was no oriflamme, but the ominous roll and clack ahead made command, guidance. The one thing was to ride.

The first salvation for any man meant leaving everything to the horse. To check or attempt to guide him meant death. Of better night sight than his rider, and no more eager than he to be trampled into a bloody pulp, the horse would put out unasked his limit of speed and care of footing. Trust him, also, to edge ahead or outside of any enveloping part of the herd.

But after a mile of this madness in the dark, the master intelligence began to assert its purpose, to control brute terror. Those at the flank, at the rear, began to see points and streaks of flame. The two men ahead, at last free on the edge of the run, were crowding thei-

horses against the front ranks of the cattle, jostling into them the best they could in a perilous give and take, firing their six-shooters across the faces of the leaders, trying to force them into a mill; such being the proper psychology in cows.

The pistol lightning dwindled to firefly points, ceased. The reports had not been audible over the roar of the run. No one could reload the cap-and-ball revolver, and six shots left the pursuer reduced to quirt and spur. To the few who remained at the encampment, there passed a lessening storm of sound. So at length came silence and suspense.

Thinking that the first two shots had been fired by some of his own men, or possibly by a frightened woman, Nabours left no guard at the camp. The side encampment alone had tenancy.

The two women of Taisie sprang from their sleeping places and ran to the little tent, not to protect their mistress but to seek protection—Sanchez was gone with the others. They saw her, in the dim light, standing close to a tall man. This was certainly not a true man of Del Sol, for he was not riding now. They ran back, undecided; could not see or hear what went on in the gloom.

A voice spoke low to Taisie's ear—a voice she knew.

"The little trunk—is it in your tent?" The hateful question, itself an accusation for the asker, was repeated.

"No!" she got strength to say, clutched by her fears, her anger, her sudden hatred.

"Where is it, then? Quick!"

"I'll not tell you!"

"All right! But watch out for it! They're after it!"

They were after it! Who were "they"? And who was this? Under which flag, all along, has been Dan McMasters, sheriff, captain?

She did not hear his voice again. Suddenly, as though he sensed her indecision, she felt herself swept to his body as she stood, her own strong body helpless under strength of his. No hand was on her mouth, but she could not cry out. She felt his cheek laid against her cheek—for one half instant; heard a sigh, a gasp, felt at her temple then a kiss as light and gentle as the embrace had been ruthless and savage. Then she was free.

She stood alone. He was gone. Yes, he went that way, in the direction the flame of the two shots had lined out. He went lightly, swiftly.

And in the morning, when first they sought why the great buzzards were hopping, they found a man, a dead man, with his hands crossed on his breast and his hat drawn down over his face. It was not Dan McMasters. None of them knew who it was. But Taisie Lockhart knew that Dan McMasters had killed this man. Why?

It was Sanchez, first back from the run, who first saw this dead man in the daylight, and he knew him.

"Nombre de Dios!"

Sanchez crossed himself. He knew the man's feet, his boots, his spurs. Not so long ago he had tied those feet under a horse's belly.

Sanchez coursed like a questing hound for the sign. Many tracks of horses. A loose horse without the Fishhook brand. All of which made mystery enough.

"Miss Taisie," demanded Milly, "You'se all a-trim-

ble, chile! Who dat man? Who him were standin' thah?"

She caught the hand Taisie had against her bosom, the hand that covered her temple.

"No! I don't know!" she heard her mistress say.

But Jim Nabours was harder to satisfy when he came in soon after sunup, his face lined as though he had lost pounds in the night ride. He cursed openly as he snatched loose his cinches and turned off his trembling and sweat-stained night horse. Then he turned to Taisie, who had come over to the men's camp.

"Who done it?" he demanded. "You a-shooting at some shadow? Look what you done! We get this run, just when they was gentling. I thought you was a cow hand!"

The girl was on the point of saying that, yes, she had shot; that she was sorry. She put a hand to her temple. . . . He had kissed her there.

"Jim, I did not shoot."

"Who did, then? That fool nigger woman? You—Milly?"

"Me? I never didn't. My gun only shoots oncet. Two shoots come, right at Miss Taisie's tent. So help me on my Bible, Mr. Jim, I never did shoot not none. No, sah!"

"Who was it, Taisie?" He used her as a child now, but his voice was sad. "The shots was right at this place. Who was it—one of our men?"

"No, Jim, no!"

"Who was he? Tell me now! You're hiding him? You know who he was?"

A very long silence. The man's face was fronting

her, streaked with the dust. He was a loyal man.

At last, "Yes!"

And now she faced him. Nabours guessed.

"McMasters! You know why he came? Ah, Taisie, girl!"

"I don't know! I think it was the trunk. He said something about it—I don't know."

"It's the scrip, Taisie! He's following that still? What did he say? Ask where it was?"

"Yes. But he said to look out for it, to watch it. I don't understand——"

"I understand that that renegade McMasters is a thief and a scoundrel. We never orto of let him go!"

She could not make reply. The world was getting too much for her, overcoming.

"Sanchez!" she said pointing.

An exclamation broke from Nabours when he saw Sanchez fling an arm, heard his faint call. He got on a horse, galloped over to where Sanchez stood, dismounted. Then he also saw the dead man.

"I know-a-dis-a *hombre*, Señor Jeem!" Sanchez was excited. "We send-a heem to jail. I tie-a da foot. How come-a heem here while he's in jail? *Nombre de Dios!*"

"But who killed him, Sanchez?"

Nabours saw the two wounds, an inch apart.

"*Quien sabe,* Señor?" replied Sanchez gravely. "I just find-a heem now."

But the tired brain of Jim Nabours, up all night and strained to his limit over the scattered herd, only grew more muddled.

"Let him lay!" he ordered savagely. "That's one

more, anyhow, no odds who got him. Buzzards is too good for him!"

"Miss Taisie," he began again as he found her at the cook fire, "that's one of the Rudabaugh gang, all right. If it was Dan McMasters killed him he done it by mistake; he thought it was one of our men. Afore he went, he folds this corp's hands and covers up his face with his hat. What more could he do?"

The girl sat silent, her face cold as some cameo in ice.

"Taisie Lockhart"—the old foreman's voice was hard now—"one thing at least—you don't need no more proof now! That's over, anyhow!"

CHAPTER XVII

MR. DALHART DECLARES

"ON OUR way, Sanchez!" commanded Nabours, breaking the tense silence of the disheartened camp. "We've got to get back. The boys are holding three or four bunches over thataway."

"Seguro, Señor Jeem," replied the old man. He nodded. Yet another rider was coming in.

"That's Dalhart. He ought to know something. We've got to have fresh horses."

"Poco tiempo!"

The keen ear of the old Mexican again served. Afar they heard a tinkling. From behind a screening mesquite fringe showed the head of the remuda, following a gray bell mare at a stiff trot. Back of the horses rode Cinquo, his clothing stripped, his face bloody and pale. He got no word of praise, nor asked one. The black bruises on his legs showed through his ripped jeans.

"Well?" The trail boss turned to Dalhart, grimed and dust-covered, who had brought a tin cup to the fire.

"We've got around a thousand head, maybe twelve hunderd. Del and two boys are holding 'em on a flat this side the pecan bottoms—three mile, I reckon. Ain't it hell? They scattered like pa'tridges. I ain't seen no one else."

"*Yo,* me an' dos hombres!" began Sanchez, excited, pointing.

"Damn it, talk English, Sanchez!" interrupted Nabours savagely.

"*Seguro; muy bien, Señor Corporal,*" rejoined Sanchez. "I say, two man and me, we got plenty *vacas* round up. They send-a me for tobac'. We got h'eight, seven hoonderd head, *piense qu' si.* Most half-a da herd."

"Not half yet. Well, Dalhart, I've got to ride the fan. Stay here and watch things. We'll make the gethering to this bed ground."

"But who done that shooting anyway?" demanded Dalhart suddenly. "That's what started 'em."

Nabours looked over his shoulder to where Taisie sat.

"Dalhart," said he, "there's funny business. The Rudabaugh gang is follering us, nigh as I can tell. They allowed to stampede the herd and then jump what was left of the camp."

"But who shot?"

"I'd take my oath it was Dan McMasters, the man we sent out of our camp. Well, he killed one of his own men."

"The hell!"

"Yes, he did. Look yon!" The great birds now made a black blot on the grass. "That's one of the Rudabaugh men. McMasters killed him by mistake. He was right in Miss Taisie's camp."

"Jim," said the cow hunter at last, "that Austin gang don't never mean fer no Del Sol herd never to leave this country. Why?"

"For the same reason they want that Burleson Lockhart scrip. For the same reason they killed Burleson Lockhart. Dalhart, them carpetbaggers have got a big game on. All the state of Texas to steal—and they're going to steal it!

"And McMasters got away again! I thought he was our friend. We're riding his horses and drinking his coffee now. She don't know that. Dalhart, ef ever a girl needed a man to take care of her, yon's one that does. One man's better'n twenty, with a woman. She needs just one—and she ain't got one.

"Well, I got to go back. Come Sanchez," he concluded. "You'll have to stay here and look out for the camp, Dalhart. They might come back. Shoot first!"

Left in charge, Mr. Dalhart employed his own methods. First he inquired of the cook for hot water, got a tin pan of water on the base of the wagon tongue and found a bit of yellow soap. Cleansing his dusty face and hands the best he could, he employed the very catholic beneficences of a split meal sack which the cook also used as a towel. Then he prowled among the bed rolls. After certain rummagings, he presently emerged clad in a brand-new pair of the light-colored trousers, with heavy stripes of black, which then made Texan apotheosis of male splendor. He even added a brilliant tie, which in good sooth represented the heart hunger of Cinquo Centavos, and almost his last dime. Dalhart was a ruthless man. What he found to his notion in the several war bags he took, trusting to be able to explain.

Oiled and curled as best might be in a cow camp,

with a final sweep into better order of his strong sunburned beard, Mr. Dalhart at last walked straight across to Taisie's bivouac, whither she had withdrawn. Without so much as by your leave, he ordered Taisie's women to go on away.

"I'm top rod here just now, Miss Lockhart," said he, "and I want to talk with you a little while. This is my first chance."

The girl looked at him. She had been in tears. Her nerves were going. She was no longer the daring Taisie Lockhart, *"dulce ridentem . . . dulce loquentem,"* like the Lalage of Horace of old, always ready to chat and ready to laugh.

"Drive them away!" Her glance was toward the distant row of solemn black birds, advancing, hopping staring.

Dalhart dropped her tent flap into a screen. He found a bundle and seated himself, not invited.

"Miss Lockhart," said he directly, "one way, I'm only one of your hands. In Uvalde, you could find out who I am."

"I suppose so. You're on point? That means my foreman thinks you know cows?"

"Yes. Now, Mr. Nabours and I been talking. We think we've been jumped by the Sim Rudabaugh bunch, of Austin. They don't ever aim to let this herd git north, Miss Lockhart. They aim to break it up and git it headed west.

"They've got their own surveyors out—away west. We seen four camps of surveyors in west there this spring, where we was hunting strays. They're locatin' range by the hundreds of sections—waste land nobody

has wanted. They're scrippin' it, ma'am. They want all the scrip they can git, and they done got it most all."

He spoke of certain things. In his mind were certain other things. His bold eyes, virile, assertive, demanding, never left the alluring picture that Taisie Lockhart made for any man. She remained languid, indifferent.

"My father said Texas lands would go up. He was laughed at. You knew him—my father?"

"No'm; I didn't know him personal. But all Texas knowed Colonel Burleson Lockhart fer a square man and a big man. This state needs him now; it shore does. We've got to clean up Austin, or Austin's goin' to take all Texas away from the Texans.

"Them folks don't want you to git the first herd north, ma'am. They'll drive that theirselves when they git things all fixed fer hit."

The girl buried her face in her hands again. Her shoulders trembled. The night had left her much unnerved.

"Yes, Miss Taisie," said the man's voice, now gentle. "Yore paw didn't come back from up north. Sim Rudabaugh did. He ain't like us. He's a heap smarter'n us Texans. He's seed more and been around more. No tellin' who's in his gang. It takes a lot of big men to swing as big a deal as he's got in mind. Now, there was Sher'f McMasters——"

"Don't! Please don't! And—what is it that brings you over here?"

"All right, I won't. I was only goin' to say, hit all works out fer to prove the general scheme Jim Nabours and me both has told you about—Rudabaugh! That

man made his boast in Austin, ma'am, last year, atter he come back from up north, he'd have the last Del Sol cow. More! He said he was goin' to ride up to Del Sol and knock on yore front door!"

"What?" She flashed a sudden glance of wrath.

"That's all. Rudabaugh played to break you first. Then, when you hadn't a way to turn—well——

"Miss Taisie Lockhart"—his voice now rang rather true, very humble—"it's bad, your lookout. You've got all of us, yes; but like Jim said, twenty men ain't the pertection of one, fer a woman."

"But what is it that you mean?"

"Now, I got to talk straight. Would you choose to look up at me, please?"

She did not raise her face.

"Well, I throwed in with this trail herd because I'd saw you! I couldn't turn back from goin'. I did allow that when we'd made yore stake for you and put you on yore feet independent, with all Del Sol and every Texan back of you, why, then—when I couldn't take no advantage at all—then I was goin' to tell you I was goin' to marry you. I thought by then you'd be more used to seein' me around."

Silence. The ruddy crown of hair covered her hid face, reddened with outraged blushes. She rose, started away. He was at her side.

"Miss Taisie, this raid has changed the whole world in one night. It's left you in danger. You don't need twenty men! You need one! The trail's no place for you, even married. But there's a church at Fort Worth, and a Methodist preacher. We'll be there afore long. That's time for you to think it over."

Anastasie Lockhart broke into a sudden hysterical laughter.

"Is it so funny, ma'am?"

"Yes!" she rejoined. "Fort Worth—that's what Jim advised, too. But first he said Austin. And it—it was another man!"

"It was Del Williams! Did you tell him——"

"I've told him nothing! He has asked me nothing! That's nothing to be discussed by you or me at any time! That will do!"

"Well, I couldn't help it—me lovin' you the minute I saw you, and follerin' in because I couldn't no ways help it; and you needin' just one such a man like me, and all—and all——"

His voice broke a bit under the blow his astonishing male vanity had received. And who was she, an orphan, to hold herself so high, when here was an honest man, a Texan, like himself?

Suddenly he reached out a lean brown hand. Her beauty was too much for him. The girl shrank, caught a cupped hand against her temple, where lay still the illicit kiss of the dark.

"No! No! You must not! No! I need some one, yes. I do! But I can't——"

"I kin wait, Miss Taisie. I allowed to wait till we'd sold yore cows. I just thought things had broke so maybe it'd be best if I didn't wait."

"Wait!" was all she could say.

Torn and unhappy, she bent her bright head once more. He was man enough to go away. When he was gone she reflected that he had been man enough to come.

And thereafter, in yet more wretched self-searching, she reasoned that, after all, her fate now had cast her into a world where a woman's range of choice was very narrow. After all, who was she, to ask the fulfillment of the old dream of human happiness? She sought comfort in philosophy. It is poor comfort for a woman.

CHAPTER XVIII

FLOTSAM

THE morning advanced. The riders had begun to reassert the dominance of man and horse over horned kine. Band joining band, converging, controlled, the approaching dust clouds seemed to show that ruin had not been complete; that the salvage was larger than an inexperienced man would have hoped.

"They got anyways a thousand head there," said Dalhart to the cook. He swung into saddle and rode out, meeting Nabours, who came ahead, throwing up a hand.

"Stop there, Dalhart! We got to tally in the findings. Knot your rope. The boys'll set 'em through."

The two wheeled apart. Slowly the herd was dribbled through between them, while the crude but efficient art of handling cows went on. Each sat his horse, facing the other. At each hundred he advanced a knot under his thumb. When the last steer had passed the two did not vary five head in the tally of the crowding mob of cattle.

"Eleven forty-six!" Nabours called. Dalhart nodded.

"I can't be sure. I made her eleven fifty."

Nabours grumbled. "It's a start, no more. Go back and help the other boys, Dalhart. There's a big holding yon way, about five mile toward the hills, besides this one. Bring 'em in."

Del Williams rode to the cook fire and had a tin cup of coffee before he roped a fresh horse and changed his saddle. Before leaving he turned to Nabours.

"Was any of our boys off north, about three mile, Jim?" he asked.

"I don't know. The run was mostly east."

"Well, I seen sever'l men riding over towards the hills where I was at, about sunup."

Nabours growled his own suspicions.

"Well, it might of been worse," went on Williams. "I seen fifty head piled in one arroyo. I don't know how many more there may be, further on; but the boys are gethering a good many at the aidge of the pecan bottoms where the creek runs. Golly-hemlock! We ain't half made the herd yet! The boys'll be bringing 'em in."

"Now, Sinker!" The foreman turned as the boy horse wrangler came up, grinning diffidently. "Reg'lar vaquero, eh, hide pants and all?"

"Del said I could have his leggins," the boy replied, blushing vividly. "Now, my pants was tore, and that there point man has got on my necktie. But please kain't I leave my horses and go help round up? My horses won't go fur."

"Huh! Want to break in and be a full cow hand, eh? Your job's on the remuda. But you can go ef you don't stay over a hour, like yore maw used to say."

The boy sang very loud as he rode off. He hoped she had seen the sprouting down on his cheek.

"I shore know what I'll do," he said to himself. "After this, nights, I'll spread down, her side the camp.

I'll sleep the neardest of anybody to her, so's't I kin keep watch."

Dust and noise, harbingers of more cattle coming in, twice more called Nabours and Dalhart to their tally stands.

"Well, anyhow, we got over twenty-five hundred head right now, and more in sight. Wait till Sinker and Sanchez comes in with their drag. Ef we get over thirty-five hunderd, that's big enough for a herd to drive good. What's a few cows? We can comb the whole country by to-morrer. They was too full to run fur, but they fanned on us."

Nabours, under the influence of rest and coffee, began to relax.

"I'll go over to Miss Taisie's camp afore long," said he, "and tell her we ain't broke yet.

"But say, Mr. Dalhart, tell me"—he cast a quizzical look at the other's rather spick-and-span appearance in contrast to his own—"was you maybe going to church? And you might let me know ef you put bear's grease on your whiskers too."

Dalhart, unmoved, stroked his luxuriant beard.

"Nem-mind," said he. "What's a man withouten a good baird? Kain't no woman git away from a baird. Now, I riz whiskers sence I was twenty, and I allus noticed, ever I swep' my baird acrost a gal's face she was shore mine."

"You ain't got no gall hardly, have you?" rejoined Jim Nabours. "Well, keep in mind there's sever'l you ain't swep' yet, ner ain't apt to. Laigs is better'n

whiskers in the cow game. Keep yore eye on that Sinker kid! He'll make a cow hand."

As to this prophecy of the old foreman, events bade fair verification. All the remainder of the day the bed-ground holding increased, and late in the afternoon came a last drove of trotting longhorns, urged on by the ambitious Cinquo, who had relieved faithful Sanchez, found watching a considerable bunch grazing while he himself awaited help.

"You're living up to them hair pants, son," was the foreman's comment.

The full complement of hands now was in camp. The cook's fire was glowing in its trench. Men were eating three meals in one—beans, corn bread, molasses. They talked, mouths full, contented. Not a man lost; maybe not over ten per cent of the herd gone; they thought the scrape well over. Even Nabours began to talk. It was these last comers, however, who had brought the biggest news.

"It was Sanchez found him," broke in Cinquo in his repeated explanation. "When I seen him, too, he was daid, plumb daid. He ain't none of our hands. He got kotched in the run where they piled over the bank."

"That so, Sanchez? *Quien es?*" demanded Nabours of the old Mexican.

"Es verdad," replied Sanchez. *"Quien es? Yo no sais.* Me, I dunno." He shrugged a thin shoulder indifferently.

"Now, he was a heavy-set man, with sort o' red face, maybe—sandy, anyhow—an' he didn't look like no real cow hand." Cinquo was more explicit.

"No, but I'll bet he was a real cow thief," growled Nabours. "I'll bet they was all around our camp, outside the herd, last night. Fools for luck. Well, anyhow, that makes two. Leave him lay where he's at, the damned thief! I only wish it was Sim Rudabaugh or Mr. Dan McMasters!"

The losses, thanks to good cow work, bade fair to be far less than the morning had promised. Nabours thought next day the main herd could be pushed on northward, slowly, while a few men were held back, detailed for a last combing of the broken ground where the run gradually had faded out. True, the herd might tally out two or three hundred short—probably less than that. But a cow was only a cow. Besides that, a number of cows had come in that did not show the Fishhook road brand, as Del Williams mentioned to Nabours.

"You mean they don't show it yet," remarked that veteran. "We're working for a orphant. A cow is only a cow, and these men in here wouldn't mind ef oncet they seen the orphant."

"I gathered them strays, er some," broke in Cinquo. "Er me an' Sanchez did. We brung in Ol' Alamo, that big dun lead steer, an' he brung in a lot o' strays follerin' him."

"I got a damn good lead steer," said Jim Nabours solemnly, helping himself to coffee. "Sinker, you got the nacherl makings of a cowman in you."

The tired men, taking without a murmur the added sleeplessness of a full-night watch, made every safeguard against a repetition of the late disaster. The

whole camp was sleepless. The cook kept his fire going all the night and fed the men as now and then they straggled in after the reassembled herd seemed safely bedded.

Even at Taisie's camp little sleep was known. Old Anita nodded at her fire, but Milly was openly bellicose.

"Ah got a load in my gun fer dat triflin' nigger Jim, Miss Taisie," she declared; "but Ah done put a-nother load down on top o' hit. Ef ary man come snoopin' roun' yere in de dark agin Ah'm gwine to bust him wide open—Ah suttenly will!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE CATTLE RIEVER

OF THE mysterious night marauders who—to their own sorrow—had invaded the Del Sol trail camp, no further trace was gained or sought. They had vanished as though into thin air, and left behind no more than surmise and suspicion. To their dead, left on the field, no soldier's honors were accorded. The embittered cowmen let them lie unburied.

The last gatherings of the scattered cattle having been concluded with such subtractions and additions as left old Jim Nabours not too ill satisfied, the great caravan passed on to the northward, day by day, like some vast millepede edging across the green surface of the unbroken sod—cows, horses, carts, flanking riders and keepers of the drag, all acting in their busy daily drama as though on a stage set upon some vast moving platform of the idle gods.

Perhaps two hundred miles, as nearly as they could guess at an unmapped and unfamiliar portion of their own state—a land by no means yet redeemed from savagery—still lay between them and the Red River, the Rubicon of that day, the northern boundary of Texas. Ten miles, twelve, once in a while fifteen miles a day, the great herd grazed and strolled, north and yet northward, unhurried by its guardians. Not so far

ahead, now, the wholly unsettled Indian Nations; and at any time the chance of yet other depredations at the hands of the determined white savages, whom they dreaded more, and whose work, they felt sure, was not yet done. As they approached the Red River, still unmolested, their anxiety grew less. Could they have seen into the unsettled land ahead of them it might well have been more.

A wild enough scene it was, that made by Rudabaugh and his score of hard-bitten men in their own encampment the first night after they themselves, pushing swiftly on ahead of the Del Sol herd, which still made their objective, pulled up on a bit of broken ground at the naturally strategic point, the south bank of the boundary river. For a time they roughly had known or guessed what the trail herd had made in northering; but their own forced march to the Red had gained them nothing.

It was time, but the Del Sol herd had not appeared or left any trace of its whereabouts. The men in the rude bivouac—they had, in their haste, brought little with them beyond what their saddle horses carried—began to grumble.

"Well, how could I tell where they'd cross?" demanded Sim Rudabaugh irritably, in answer to some query. "They ought to cross here. This is right on the old Whisky Trail, due north of Worth and Bolivar. This is where Jess Chisholm used to cross when he headed for the Canadian. That's why I pushed on in here."

"Well, they didn't. When they come to Bolivar last

week they must have swung up the Elm towards the Spanish Fort, away in west. Good cowmen, they sure are. Anyways, they've give us the slip."

"They've done nothing of the sort, Hanson," retorted the leader of the band. "There's nobody gives Sim Rudabaugh the slip."

"Well, they're north of the Red by now, like enough."

"Don't you think it! The Red's up, almost bank full. No herd could ford it. Besides, even if they was north of the Red, I reckon we know the Nations better than they do, and can do more with the tribes. If they get too far west they'll hit the Comanches. They're not done with this trail yet.

"Not that I want their damned cows now," he added. "We'd make more by going back to Palo Pinto and working up the Brazos. But it's not every herd that has a hundred miles of scrip along with it in a box. Once word comes down that a herd's been sold at Abilene, that scrip'll go up, and go up fast."

"And then besides!" grinned another man.

"And then besides, yes! There never was a man I hated worse than Burleson Lockhart. I'll follow him beyond the grave. Scrip I take from him now, or from his family, is worth to me five times over, even now he's dead. And his daughter——"

Followed some low obscenities from his followers which did not abash the ruffian chief.

"Follow me and you'll see yet," he resumed. "I've never yet quit. It's easy to cross here if we have to, and follow the Arbuckle Trail along the Washita. They go twelve miles a day. We can go fifty. We can head

them when we please. I don't intend that herd shall ever see Abilene. No, nor I don't aim that any man on that herd'll ever cross south of the Red again!"

The cold-blooded ferocity of the man silenced his followers, as always it did. They were all in one way or another allied in a vast and unscrupulous border conspiracy in a land to which little actual law yet had come. The dullest of them knew that their heyday would be brief, that events were moving fast. The swiftest horse and the surest hand, the boldest and most ruthless leadership—these were their hope. So they followed Rudabaugh, the real leading spirit of the predacious drifters who had seen in the disordered post-bellum political conditions a vast opportunity for gain in a dulled and disorganized land which did not yet suspect its own riches. Rudabaugh had imagination, saw far ahead.

"I swear!" he broke out in one of the half-epileptic fits of choler which sometimes marked him—he was only a pirate of old reborn in the blood of the Civil War —"I swear, some one's got to suffer for some of this! Last night four Indians rode right into our camp and drove off six horses, and us needing every head we've got. You all hear me, now! I swear I'm going to shoot the first Indian I see north of the Red, I don't give a cuss what sort it is. We've gone palavering along and letting a lot of longhorns shoot us up, and then we have the Chickasaws run circles around us."

At first no one made reply, though a wild band they made, such as no other land, no other conditions, could have produced.

"Do you mean that, Sim?" asked one of them presently.

"You know damned well I do," rejoined the leader. "You needn't put it past me."

To Rudabaugh, subterranean politician, soldier of fortune and renegade, no title or description could more nicely have been fitted than the one word "ruffian." Of nondescript figure, perhaps of middle height, his body as well as his face showed dissipation written indelibly even for his age of forty-odd. His hair was dark, not yet much thinned, and had a reddish cast as though reflected from the deep floridity of his complexion. His eyes also were hazel to the point of redness, smudged and flecked in the pupils and evil to look at. His lips, thick and astonishingly red, carried out the misprized plan of his other features; he was coarse, common. Yet the inordinate personal conceit, confidence, vanity of the man had mirror in his clothing. Even on the trail he might have been made up for the stage villain, with the high boots, the velvet coat, the gaudy tie—in a borderland where tie or collar was not customary. Excess as much as daring was stamped on him, flamboyance, aberration; yet even at middle age he by no means had outgrown his earlier faith in his own invincibility with women; nor had his other activities put woman from his mind. His camp talk, not to be hinted, always gave proof of that.

To his unquestionable mental boldness, his daring imagination in material matters, Rudabaugh added the callous and ruthless indifference to the rights or sufferings of others which often secures precedence in a band of criminals. The bad eminence of Rudabaugh was conceded as of merit.

Of Rudabaugh's earlier and possibly criminal record

there was little known. Only a very few in his newly chosen home knew he had been border outlaw for many a year in a time when border outlaws really existed. His field lay in the shady confines of a circle comprising parts of Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and the unknown Indian Nations, always refuge for bad men and those restive under the law. Leader of an organized band of herd cutters on the Missouri-Arkansas border, on the very earliest cattle drives, before the railroads came, he had of late got visions of wider things. He had followed south, back-trailing, to the origin of the cows that first dribbled north. Credit him with conservative business sense; he had caught scent of profits to come in cows.

Working from these beginnings, Rudabaugh later had planned the most extensive range rieving ever known. No better nor worse than many a later man of large instincts and few principles who operated in trail beef, he had found in politics the most powerful agency possible in banditry. Once established as the covert boss of a wide state machine, he did not lack followers. If his activities and those of his like had much to do with the sudden stiffening and increase of the border constabulary of the Texas Rangers, his shrewd notion of tremendous effects on Texas of any valid railroad market also had weight in certain widespread Texas circles.

No doubt pique, baffled vanity, had much to do with the presence of Rudabaugh's gang this far north; but as he had said just now, persistence was a characteristic of the man. One thing he did not share with any man. The image of Taisie Lockhart was in his blood.

Whether he planned to rob her and flout her, to rob her and humble her, to rob her and then try to impress her with some large gesture of generosity, who could tell of a mind so insanely blurred and vague? At least, he remained resolved to follow the Del Sol herd and the Del Sol owner to the last mile of the trail unless sooner satisfied in one or more purposes of his own. Another quality of leadership—he could keep his own counsel.

"Well," Rudabaugh vouchsafed at last, helping himself again to food at the fire, "they've only postponed things. So far, they've got two of us, and one of them Sam Barclay, my office deputy, and as good a man as I had."

"Good on the books, maybe," volunteered a voice, "but no good as a cowman. The Del Sol men rid it through and gathered, like enough, every cow except what landed on top of Sam. And they never dug a spade of dirt to cover him!" he added virtuously. "No way to treat a man. Why, them people is outlaws! And I'll bet they're crowing now over shooting Bentley!"

"They're good cowmen," commented Rudabaugh, after a long time. "We can't take any chances with them, day or night. But I've got a few red friends between here and the Canadian that'll help pickle their goose, I'm thinking. No white man yet ever scared a Comanche very bad, least of all old Yellow Hand, and I'll bet he's in the Nations right now. If we can find his band and show them four thousand beeves and two hundred picked horses I don't think that herd'll get much further north. Talk of a Cherokee outlet west to the buffalo lands—the Comanches'll have something to

say about a Texas outlet north! I think I'll show something to our Del Sol friends."

"You?" smiled a hearer. "Thought you said you'd kill the first Indian you saw north of the Red!"

"So I shall. I don't throw a bluff and forget it. That's only my private matter. I'm going to kill that Indian just as a matter of conscience." He grinned.

"But before we move out of here," he added, "we ought to get some word from our man McMasters. I've not seen hide or hair of him since he got run out of the Del Sol camp and came pretty near getting shot. He said he'd go on in alone and get the trunk out of the girl's tent. Well, he didn't. Anyhow he disappeared."

"He's always disappearing," remarked another man. "He won't work with us. I can't line that fellow out."

"Well, he told me he had to play both ends against the middle," grumbled Rudabaugh. "But he ought to come in and report. I don't mind a man being mysterious, but I don't want him too damned mysterious. All I could do to trade with him, after that Ranger run-in on the Del Sol, before he moved north with the herd."

Had it been known, the bandit camp was not alone beset with puzzles and problems. That very week, a few nights earlier, in the encampment of the Del Sol herd, old Anita at dawn brought to her mistress in her own little tent a note, folded, addressed to no one, in the handwriting of an educated man—a handwriting she had never seen.

"El caballero vien' aqui, señorita," said Anita calmly, as she handed over the folded paper. *"Esta noche, heem vien' aqui."*

"He came to-night, Anita? Who came—what man? And what is this?"

"Yo no sais," replied Anita. "I dunno. He's tall-a man, *si.* He come-a my *carreta,* shake-a me soft, while Sanchez he's on da herd. He say, give-a dis to *la Señorita.* But s'pose-a I make-a some holler, he goin' choke-a me sure! I dunno some more."

Anita said nothing of a coin at that time tied in the corner of her underskirt. Indeed, she thought it just as well Sanchez should not know. As for her mistress, she might do her own guessing; she could read Americano, whereas, herself, Anita, could not.

The communication was impersonal, detached, as Anastasie Lockhart found. She hurried at once to her trail boss; and if she had any guess in her own mind she kept it there.

Above Fort Worth village, head due north, to Bolivar. Then don't go on to the Station—swing northwest up the Elm. Cross near the Spanish Fort. Feel west then for the Beaver. Then run by the North Star six hundred miles. Good water and grass. You can make all crossings. Time about two months. Keep west of the Whisky Trail. Herd cutters and thieves. Watch out all the time for Indians.

Which, to a trail boss wholly without map, guide or knowledge of the far and unknown country of the north on ahead, must have seemed a godsend, even lacking authenticity or origin.

CHAPTER XX

TAKING TOLL

UNTIL now Jim Nabours, Texan native born and, barring his travels under General Kirby Smith, of small experience abroad, had been in the habit of regarding his own horizon as sufficient. He had yet to learn a thing or two to show him how swiftly customs were changing in the Lone Star State. In a general way he had heard of "river improvements," paid for in Texas land scrip, but as to details in that new and pleasing form of plunder he had little knowledge and no concern.

Neither had he ever heard of cattle inspecting—yet another form of graft devised in Austin, where more was known or foreseen of the coming cattle hegira than anywhere else in Texas. Furthest of all now from his suspicions was the fact that a gentleman by name of Jameson, well accredited in the current administration, combined in his person the duties of president of a certain "Land and Improvement Company" and of State Cattle Inspector as well; and that this same Jameson that spring was engaged with a small party of his own on a wilderness trip, scouting up and down the Red, in search of towhead snags that might be pulled, or of passing cattle that might be inspected, to the glory of God, as the first Spanish improvers and inspectors of that country once would have phrased it. Commerce

sometimes becomes religion, as religion sometimes becomes war.

There always lacked explicitness in the story of the Del Sol crossing of the Red River. Jameson—owner of fat contracts in river improvements and cattle inspector by the grace of the carpetbag imperator at Austin—could bring no imposing narrative of himself and his deeds in connection with the advent of this apparition of thousands of wild long-horned kine, handled by a concourse of wild men, which one day broke out of the blackjacks near his camp. That was the Del Sol herd; but Jameson, being only a cattle inspector, could not be supposed to notice the T. L. and Fishhook brand.

It was Nabours himself, riding ahead to scout the approach to the high south bank, who had stumbled across the new camp of the inspector and his men.

"How, friend?" the herd foreman saluted. Jameson came forward.

"Which way?"

"North"—succinctly.

"North? Across the river? That's the Indian country."

Nabours grinned.

"Shore it is."

"North? But who are you?"

"Sincet you ask me, friend, I'm foreman of the Fishhook, four thousand head, bound for Aberlene, wherever in hell that is. You ever done hear tell of the old Chisholm road?"

"The Chisholm Trail? Why, that's away in east. He crossed either at Colbert's or at the Red Station—

the Station's usual. You're off your road forty or fifty miles."

"Am I?" said Jim Nabours innocently. "Sho! That's too bad! Well, maybe we can sort of cut in on the trail north of here somewheres, huh? I got a high-trained old oxen, name of Alamo, a old mossy horn raised by General Santy Anny, and he allows we cross in here somewheres. He knows where at's Aberlene. Do you?"

Jameson frowned at levity. Then suddenly his chest swelled.

"Well, lucky enough you happened to hit my camp," said he. "You broke in west, here, to escape the law!"

"Law? What law?"

"Well, you're trying to move cows across the Red, off the soil of Texas, and not have the herd inspected."

"Inspected? We done inspected 'em several times. They're all right."

"You know perfectly well what I mean. The law provides a fee for the proper inspection of all cattle moving off their own range—checking up and recording the brands, looking to see they're all in the same road brand, accounting for strays, and so forth. Looks to me like you are trying to evade the fees. Well, I'm the state inspector for this district."

"That so? You aim to collect something?"

"Yes, certainly. I've got to look over your herd before you cross; that's my duty. I may have to turn you downstream, to the regular crossing. You don't belong in here, and you know it. Where's your herd?"

"Back below the blackjacks, on the Elm," responded Nabours promptly, a gleam in his gray eye that the

other did not note. "How'd it do for you to ride back with me and have a look at our outfit where the herd is made?"

Jameson turned back to his own men, a half dozen ague-smitten whites, and ordered his horse brought up. When he mounted to ride south with the innocent stranger of the trail he made one of the capital errors of his career in the new country of Texas, and one which he never saw fit to describe in full to his chief, Rudabaugh, when at last he had reached the latter in his own camp.

In a more open valley they came in sight of the great T. L. herd, scattered over two miles of country, grazing or lying at rest. A dozen riders lolled, leg over saddle horn, themselves a-doze, waiting for the foreman's return.

"Ain't it purty?" said Nabours, the real cowman's love of cows in his speech. And it was a noble sight, this wild picture in a wild land. Any way one looked there was no edge to the world.

But Jameson was more businesslike.

"Well, now," said he, "it is a good bunch. How many did you say you had?"

"Thirty-eight hunderd and sixty-five, we made our last tally," answered the T. L. foreman, the glint again in his eye. "Why?"

"Well, now, I never want to make bother for a good cowman," Jameson answered. "It's true you're off your course, but maybe that's natural. I'll just take your own count and let you go. You can pay me the fee and I'll not bother you any more at all."

"Won't even ride in amongst the herd to look at the brands, nor nothing?"

"Why, no! What's the use? I can trust men like you. Just pay me the fee and let her rip."

"And how much is the fee, Mister Inspector?"

"Nothing at all, you might say—two bits a head. Taking your own count—let's see; call it thirty-six hundred head for easy figuring. Divide her by four. Nine's a nine and naught's a naught—she comes to nine hundred dollars. Ought to be a cold thousand; but as I said, that's nothing amongst men like us. Give me that and I'll let you go and never take another look. I'll trust a man like you."

Jim Nabours had played in many a game where one does not display his emotions. He set his face now, almost suppressing the dull red that took over the gray glint of his eye. The sum of nine hundred dollars was the same as nine million to him. There was not a hundred dollars, even of Mexican make, in all the convoy, and he knew that.

"Like you say, that's little enough," said he. "Two bits a throw ain't worth talking over, not amongst men like us. But just for sake of friendship, let's ride on over to our wagon and have a cup of coffee—you orto see how pore it is."

He spoke with a finality hard to evade. The other rode alongside. A quarter of a mile, and Nabours threw up his hand. Del Williams swung away from his stand and came up at a gallop. Nabours had loosed his rope.

"Del," said he, "this is Mr.—I dunno."

"Jameson; Henry D. Jameson, of Austin, gentlemen."

"And he says he's the cattle inspector on the Red. It costs us two bits a head to cross the river, Del. It ain't much, only nine hunderd dollars. And so——"

"Nine hun——" But Del Williams did not finish.

The rope which Jim Nabours idly had uncoiled suddenly shot out behind him with a quick side flirt. It settled fair around the neck of Henry D. Jameson, the first cattle inspector Texas ever knew. The next instant the aforesaid Henry D. Jameson was out of his saddle, his hands clawing grass as he slid along the ground, choking very rapidly. Del Williams on chance laid his own rope on the neck of the Jameson horse, which seemed a good one.

"You damn thief! You low-down, lying son of a 'niquity, you!" The wrath of Jim Nabours, smoldering a half hour, now flamed. His tongue waxed unprintable while in two composite languages of the Southwest he cursed Henry D. Jameson till his own face was as red as that of his victim was empurpled. Del Williams, gun in hand, followed close, his cue obvious.

"Git up, damn you!" at length croaked the foreman. "You stand up! You'll charge Texas men for wetting their girths in a Texas river, will you? Pay you nine hunderd dollars? We'll see you and all Austin in hell before we'll pay you a damned cent. Come on now quiet, or we'll leave you plumb quiet. Come along! It's lucky we ain't got no fire lit or I'd run a Fishhook on you for luck.

"Don't shoot him, Del. But what'll we do with this, now we got it?"

The men on guard saw the sudden commotion. A half dozen came, jerking up, ropes a-swing, eager. A vast Cossack laughter rose when Nabours explained.

"Prop up a cart tongue!" called Len Hersey.

But the victim now noted the sudden apparition of a slender figure astride a singular white-hipped horse, coming up at a gallop.

"What's this, men?" demanded Taisie. "What are you doing there?"

"Ma'am," said Jim Nabours, now more calm, "we ain't doing nothing much. We're just going to hang a damned thief that wants to colleck two bits a head on our cows for swimming the Red River."

"But what—but why?" Taisie's own brow puckered.

Jameson found speech, even in his surprise, for now he saw this was no slender boy at all.

"Madam," said he, a noose lying on his shoulder and one hand at it, "these men have resisted the law. I am the lawful inspector for this district. I have come here in the pursuit of my duty."

"You've got a dangerous duty," said Taisie Lockhart straitly. Her own soul was Texan. "Inspect us, charge us—for what?"

Jameson tried to explain.

"Shut up! We're wasting time!" broke in Nabours, jerking the rope. "We ain't got nine hunderd dollars; and if we had we wouldn't give you nor no man a copper cent to ride this range ary way we like.

"What'll we do with him, boys?" He turned again

to his men. "Ef we let him go he may start something. Hyenuses runs in bunches. What'll we do?"

"That's a question!" scoffed Dalhart. Len Hersey again named the wagon tongue; but Taisie Lockhart raised a hand.

"No!" she called. "No! Wait!"

"We can't wait, ma'am," said Nabours. "We're wasting time. The Red's running full now and maybe raising every hour for all we know. We can't wait here."

"Then—tie him and leave him!" suddenly spoke the saddle Portia. "Leave him here—his friends may find him."

"Aw, hell!" said a voice. It was that of Cinquo Centavos, the horse herd. Nabours turned to him.

"Sinker, go get a couple of hobbles." The boy rode off.

"What are you going to do to me?" began Jameson. "I warn you——"

"Don't warn us none!" rejoined Nabours. "Ef you do we'll kill you. Keep your mouth shut! The girl's the only thing saved you."

"Yon's a nice cactus stand, boys," he resumed, his face relaxing as he looked around. "Hog-tie him and throw him in the cactus, deep as you can. Ef he tries to get out plug him.

"That's yore sentence, Mister Cow Inspector, and it looks like God has had mercy on yore soul Ef you get out don't try charging no more Texas men for riding over the free lands. They won't have it. Quick, boys! Don't waste no more time."

Portia rode away, not knowing exactly how far her

authority really would go with her wild crew. As she passed, her ears were assailed with the supplications of Henry D. Jameson, bound hand and foot and exceedingly full of cactus spines.

Whereby may be seen the very natural reason for his enmity and his desire for revenge when he was found the next day by his own men. He voiced the same emotions, though he did not give full details, when he joined the freebooter camp of Rudabaugh, far to the east, when later he had found those friends.

CHAPTER XXI

THE RUBICON

NOW it was noon of the next day. The cattle had been pushed close to the south bank of the great mysterious river. The foreman sat with his employer on the steep crest of the ravine selected as the take-off for the ford. A bridge had never been, a ferry no man had dreamed of here. Flowed only the wide sweep of tawny waters, boiling and fretting, bearing rape of far-off flats, tree trunks rolling and dipping.

The Red was up! This was an ominous and savage scene, and one to depress even the boldest heart; for over this flood must pass each horned head ever to find a market in the north.

To Anastasie Lockhart, whitely looking out over the mad waters, this seemed the very end. It did not appear possible to cross. It never would have seemed possible to Nabours had he been of longer trail experience or less desperate in view of other dangers which might come again if they tarried here indefinitely. A freshet of less extent later was known to hold back a hundred thousand cows. But Jim Nabours now had made up his mind to take a chance.

"I'm going to throw the carts over first, ma'am," said he. "Then I'll cross the cows. I'm going to hold the horses back this time. Then, after the last head's over, a lot of us'll cross back after you. We'll know

the channel and the bars better then. Don't you be a-scared. We'll get you over somehow. That's how I got it figgered, ma'am."

"She's up, Jim," said Taisie quietly. She was trying her very best to be brave.

"Yep, some. But she's fell a foot since last night. She shows a bar, a quarter below, and a low flat that edges in shaller on the fur side. I think that's the real bank, and like enough hard footing.

"We could wait a week, maybe. She might raise and she might fall. We'll soon know how deep she is. I don't reckon she's not over two-three hunderd yards actual swimming—I can't tell. I don't want to wait here. You know why."

"Can we make it, Jim?" asked the girl soberly.

"I think we can, ma'am," said the old foreman as quietly. "Ef I didn't, do you s'pose I'd throw 'em in? She has been crossed by cows, down below, for the Arkansaw market. Yore own paw has crossed her. Can't we? If Jess Chisholm, or any of the Chickasaw whisky runners, could cross her with stock so can we. Huh? I'm a good cowman, ma'am, and I got the best bunch of hands ever pushed a foot in a stur'p."

Taisie Lockhart turned on him the sober gaze of her steady eyes, but made no reply at the time.

"Jim!" Suddenly she turned on him.

"Ma'am?"

"Jim! I've got no one else—I've got to come to you. Cal Dalhart asked me to marry him—again, to-day."

"Well, you didn't, and you can't. The last minister was at Forth Worth. There's others of the same mind, Taisie. Has Del Williams spoke? Dalhart's lied."

She shook her head.

"Poor Del!" said she. "So quiet."

"Well, he done spoke to me more'n oncet. He allows, and so do I, that no man had orto talk a word to you about no such thing until after he ain't working for you no more. That's until after Aberlene. That's the way Del put it. I liked it of him. Cal Dalhart's a leetle brash, to my notion."

"Why do women always make trouble, Jim? I'm making trouble right here. I've made it from the start."

"Well, ma'am, Eve, she begun it right at the real start. They always done so, since. I got to pass word again there can't be no courting on the Fishhook herd, not till after Aberlene, ma'am. I told you to get married and go back home; but you wouldn't. Now, see where you are! Time enough for marrying and giving in marriage, ma'am, ef we ever get to Aberlene. Ef we don't we'll not need study about that nohow. Huh?"

"I'll be good, Jim," said Taisie, smiling.

But when once more she looked at the river she did not hope ever to see Abilene. She classed herself now as the last of the Texas Lockharts. She would not disgrace the name.

Ticklish work it was, and asking alike resource and courage; but methodically as though they had done nothing else in all their lives, the men of Del Sol went about it now.

Under Nabours' direction they got together long logs of cottonwood drift, dragging them in at the ends of their lariats, cowman fashion. Taking the cook

cart for their first experiment, they lashed some of the longer logs under the body, unbolting the tongue. The clumsy vehicle was heavily loaded. How much of swimming water there would be none could tell; but their philosophy was wholly empirical. Nabours turned back at the edge of the water.

"Keep right after me, men, and keep her a-coming!" he called to the riders who now were in readiness to take the water. "Don't try to hold her against the current. Let her slide down, and keep your horses swimming. Ef we make that bar we're all right.

"You, Del, go upstream in front—Cal, get in front below. You've got the hind rope upstream, Len, and Sanchez, you go downstream. Keep her going just like it was on the ground. She'd orto float some anyway. Come on now!"

He spurred into the rolling discolored stream. His horse, snorting and trembling even at the brink, within five yards of the steep bank was in swimming water; but he headed straight across, gallantly, though carried steadily downstream.

Stripped to their underclothing, and minus their pistol belts, the men spurred in. With a sudden plunge the unwieldy craft took the water at the rear of the horsemen.

"By golly, she floats!" called out a voice on the shore.

Cal Dalhart flung up a hand with a yell. Old Sanchez crossed himself industriously. But all four of the horses, muzzles flat and nostrils blowing, followed as best they could the leader who swam ahead, his saddle horn still showing high. That it was all a mad en-

deavor, no sane man could have doubted. But Providence was ever kind to men who dare.

Those remaining on shore watched the strange procession in absolute silence. Taisie covered her eyes. The plan of the crossing had much good judgment in it, but only extreme good fortune ever could give it success. By some kind impulse of its own, the current began to carry the clumsy contrivance toward the head of the sand bar at midstream, scarcely more than visible above the surface, but offering great hope to the swimming horses. The silent watchers at last saw the horse of the leader plunge upwards and get footing. The two lead horses followed, all of them still belly deep. The length of the reatas of the rear men allowed them also to get footing while the great wheels of the cart, hanging below the edges of the raft, remained floating free. The power of five horses, even with soft footing under them, finally enabled the men to drag it to floating water beyond the head of the bar. To their relief it found temporary anchorage when the wheels caught bottom.

Nabours sat his half-submerged horse, looking studiously out across the remaining waterway.

"Hold on here, boys, till I try her out," he commanded. "I think from here acrost she's sorter flat. Ef she won't float the cart, cut out the logs, splice your ropes and fetch one on acrost to me so we can yank her through."

They got floatage for a little way out from the bar, but presently the raft became a liability and not an asset for them. They cut log after log free and let it run downstream. Nabours' horse was no more than

belly deep ahead of them. Four hide reatas, each of forty feet and all spliced, at last gave them connection with the solid shore. With a great shout they yanked the first cart up the farther bank.

Nabours rode up to the front of his amphibious vehicle and disclosed Buck, the negro cook, who had been praying on the floor of the cart, up to his knees in water part of the time, and now still of grayish complexion under his natural pigmentation.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" he demanded. "Climb down out of there, now, and get things ready for a meal against we get the next cart acrost."

It was necessary for the five men to recross the river. After a long study of both shores for a take-off, they concluded to wade down to the head of the bar, cross the swimming water from that point, and to land below the original take-off on the south shore, at a point where the high bank flattened. Two of the five men knew almost nothing of swimming. Each man put his life upon the strength and courage of his horse. Their work was there and it had to be done. They eased their mounts by slipping out of saddle, swimming downstream and taking tow, one hand clinging to a saddle thong.

It is enough to say that they did make the recrossing. Taking advantage of the rebound of the current from the bar, they found footing on the south bank perhaps a quarter of a mile below the original take-off. Wet, half-naked, they all whooped on up to the ford head, where all the remainder of their company were huddled.

"She's all right, Miss Taisie!" yelled out Nabours. "We can do it plumb easy. You stay here where you

are. I'm going to put Milly and Anita in the next cart. We'll swim you over special, on horseback. That's a heap safer'n any boat. All you got to do is just to set still on your horse and let him alone."

The delay with the second cart was but short. Old Milly, on her knees in the sand hysterically supplicating her deity, was forcibly assisted to the seat where already Anita, patiently telling her beads, was seated, awaiting fate.

Again they pushed out; once more they made the head of the bar; and this time, with even less difficulty than at first, finished the second half of the crossing. For the second time, wet to the skin, the men crossed back, cursing the luck which had brought them here to meet high water, but as yet meeting with no mishap. Nabours looked dubiously at the horses, which had made the crossing twice. The men refreshed themselves with hot coffee and a hurried bite to eat. The farther camp now was made, so there would be coffee at each end of the crossing.

But now they must address themselves to the tremendous experiment of crossing the herd. True, these had had swimming water at the Colorado, the Brazos, the Trinity; but in each case the farther shore was well in view of the take-off and the swimming channel narrow. What would the cattle do now, facing a moving sea of roily water?

"Ready with them fresh horses, men!" called Nabours. "Point the herd in here. Make them take water just back of me, and throw 'em in spreaded. All of you act just like it was on the ground. Take your points, you, Cal and Del! All you swings, ride right

above and below just like you was on the trail. They'll swing down plenty in the current. Take it easy and quiet. If any of you gets scared them cows'll be scared too. Ef they begin to mill it'll be hell for every one of us; so keep 'em spread out and moving. Here's where we make a cap or shore spoil a coonskin."

With cracking of horns and tossing of heads, the front of the herd came shuffling down the shallow draw to the edge of the water, led by a few lank and rangy steers, old Alamo, the accepted lead steer, still in front. They were creatures alert and wise as deer, true longhorn stock of the lower range. Something of the wild instinct blended with their recent practical education. Crowded by the numbers pushed against them from the rear, old Alamo shook his head for half an instant, then bent his knees and plunged in, following the swimming horse on ahead. Some men still rode the same mounts. Now and then a man lightened ship, by slipping out of saddle for a time.

One by one, by fives and tens and scores, the other cattle followed the lead thus established. The inshore leg of the long moving U passed out and down, the cattle swimming steadily, gently, their muzzles level, their tails spread. They knew well enough where they were to land.

The stream of the herd seemed almost endless, but when the great U once was established—the cattle finding footing on the bar at midstream and wading over the shallows beyond—the line of action was perfectly apparent to every animal as it was pushed up to the river brink. They took the water as had those before them, and formed a continuous living line across the

river. It was a magnificent spectacle. It was a triumph of personal courage combined with knowledge of the art of cows. But surely fate aided in this first and riskiest crossing of the Red by any herd passing northbound to the rails.

There was little need of guidance after the first of the herd had reached the bar in midstream, and here some of the riders turned back to the south shore, riding up to the take-off. Again and again they took the water below the swimming stream of cattle. They could see the long line of the cattle elevate itself like a great parti-colored snake at the bar, thence writhing along as though upon the ground, and fully visible as it topped the farther shore. The great adventure seemed in a fair way to conclude itself upon the side of courage.

The old Del Sol foreman was a good cowman, as good as the next, and there were few phenomena in the trade of cows with which he was not familiar. One might have seen him all that day looking up anxiously at the sky. The heavens were dull and overcast; a bad day to put cattle at a ford. Rain portended; for long there was no glimpse of the sun. But had there been any glimpse of the sun the veteran foreman would never have pushed his herd into the river late in the afternoon, for a reason which any trail man would have understood.

At that point the river ran almost north and south, so that the course of the cattle was almost westward. In the evening any rays of the sun would lie like a path across the water.

But cattle will not swim into the sun. No good trail

boss ever undertook to cross a herd into a sunset. The one hope of Nabours was in a continuous cloudiness of the evening sky. He did not want the sun to shine.

But now, as he turned his own anxious face toward the west, he saw a greater definition of the piling clouds. The lower edge of yonder heavy bank was tinged with silver. By and by the sun would drop through. Then its light would lie across the water, straight into the eyes of the swimming cattle.

The sudden oath of old Jim Nabours had many factors in it—pity for what he knew might happen, regret for his own hastiness, apprehension for the property which was not his, resentment at what seemed to him an unjust fate and a poor reward for the courage which his men had shown. Nature, always merciless, now seemed mockingly vindictive.

No act of man could affect that which was now to happen. The almost level rays of the sun did fling their burnished path across the yellow waters. It was cast straight into the eyes of the drag, some three or four hundred animals which had not yet crossed the swimming channel. It half blinded for a moment even the eyes of the men. A floating log came down among them, caught the upper cattle, swung crosswise.

The line broke. There was a great uptossing of horns, a jumbling of shoulders as some animals attempted to find floatage on the backs of others. The spaces were lost, the bodies were packed together in a mass, struggling, moaning—and steadily passing downstream. The dreaded swimming mill was on!

Little enough could the bravest or most skilled men do now. What men could do, the two riders now caught

in the mill attempted. They did not try to swim free of the mass, but drove into it, attempting to break and point out the mill so that the cattle would find footing somewhere below. At times the head and shoulders of their ponies showed, climbing upon the shoulders of the swimming cattle, the men beating with their quirts, kicking, urging, shouting. But the cattle would not swim into the sun.

Those upon the nearer shore heard the sound of the rush of waters and a combined low moan, indescribable. It was hopeless. Not the best efforts of the entire company could have broken that fatal midstream mêlée. As though in a dream, Taisie Lockhart, wringing her hands, stood dumb and saw go forward one of the sudden tragedies of the trail.

"Leave them go, men! Come back! We can't save them now! Come on out!" Nabours ordered back his men on the farther side of the bar.

They stood looking at the moving mass which made a dark blot below the bar, where the current once more headed for the east. Neither head of horse nor man long showed above the floating island.

"That was Dan and Billy," said Jim Nabours, the first tears in his eyes any man had seen there. "I done it my own self! Look at that sun!"

It was dusk when he and half a dozen of his best men once more rode up the shore to the take-off. Taisie met him, sobbing unreservedly. The veteran herdsman himself could not speak.

CHAPTER XXII

"TILL ABILENE"

"WE can't do nothing more to-night." Nabours had joined his companions at the fire. "Find a critter if you can, and kill it for supper," he added, turning to Cinquo, who white and silent, had stood at the side of his mistress through all the late tragic scene.

Stripped, wet and cold, the trail men sat in silence. The sound of a distant shot in the brush promised them food—a straggling yearling from the drag which had been lost among the willows; but they were so dulled with fatigue, regret, sorrow, that they hardly would have cooked for themselves had not Taisie and Cinquo taken a hand.

The night settled down with a certain chill along the water's edge. The darkness held unusual terrors for the lone girl. Suddenly she dropped her face in her hands, huddling against the wet shoulder of the man who came nearest to being her protector.

"Jim! Jim!" she sobbed. "Take care of me! I am scared!"

"So'm I scared, Miss Taisie," rejoined Jim Nabours truthfully. "Lord ha' mercy on me!"

The men of Del Sol slept ill enough, close to the embers of their fire. Cinquo's saddle blankets, partly

dry at least, he gave to their mistress, for whom he had made a bower somewhat apart.

The boy was the first to move in the foggy dawn and to find his horse. He rode down the river bank in the direction of the last tinkling of the lead mare's bell. He was gone for the best part of an hour before he brought up the remuda. By that time the other men had rebuilt their wastrel fire.

Something seemed on Cinquo's mind. He approached Nabours, who stood apart, moody and depressed.

"Mr. Jim," said he, "I met a man down there, and he was riding a blue-crane Fishhook horse."

The foreman turned to him.

"You are sure?"

"I kin read a brand."

"Did he say anything to you? What?"

"He was rather quiet. He was a tall man with a little mustache and a gray hat. He told me not to tell you who he was—and I hain't told you. He told me he seen the place where the mill landed last night. There's dead cows all along this side the river, and besides was two dead men—that was Bill and Dan. He said he pulled them out and covered up their faces. He said he knew a better crossing down below, and he wished we'd of knowed where it was at. Then he rid back down the river, when he left."

"A damn good thing he did!" said the trail boss. "Ain't I had enough without that set of thieves?

"Eat, men," he added to the half-clad group of stiffened men around the fire. "We have got work to do."

He made no comment on the news the boy had brought, but led the way. With knives and sharpened

sticks, they dug two graves in the sand; stood with hats off for a little time, silent. Some men began to kick dirt in on top of two saddle blankets. They rode away.

In the draggled bivouac at the head of the crossing there remained then only the mistress of Del Sol and the boy Cinquo, who had been ordered to remain. The latter engaged himself in broiling some pieces of meat at the fire, not for himself. His divinity came out at last, having made such toilet as she could.

"Where are the other men?" she asked.

"They're down a-burying Dan and Bill, ma'am."

The not infrequent tears came again to Taisie Lockheart's eyes.

"They come ashore nigh a mile below here, a man told me. He come up from down the river when I was down after the horses. A tall young fellow he was, with a dark mustache. He told me he had found where the mill landed, and the boys and everything."

"You don't know who he was?"

"I know he was a-riding a Fishhook horse, ma'am. I've saw him afore, yes."

Taisie Lockheart turned quickly away, with no reply.

"Well," began Nabours surlily, without much speech to his mistress or to any one of the company, "we've got to get the horses acrost. Throw them in, Sinker; drive that old gray mare in first."

"I don't have to drive her in; she'll foller me," replied the boy. "I ain't going to let nobody point her lead for me and my remuder. They know me. Old Suze, she'll foller right in after me. Ef you can swim

it, I kin. Besides, she's six inches lower than she was last night."

"Huh, six inches would do a heap o' good out there, wouldn't it?" grumbled Nabours. "You ain't running this herd."

"No, but I'm running the remuder," said the boy stoutly. His eyes began to fill with tears.

"Oh, well, get in then!" The trail boss looked at him kindly, his own eyes none too dry. "There's only one way to make a cow hand. If he lives he lives!"

None the less, he and his two lead men flanked the horse herd close behind the plucky boy when he spurred in ahead, followed by the bell mare and the rest of the horse band. The course was much as it had been with the cattle. The horses swam strongly and confidently and in due time made the head of the bar, which now was more exposed.

"Take 'em on out now, Sinker; it's safe from here on. We've got to go back oncet more, to get the boss. Come on, you, Cal and Del. This is the last trip. Hurry! She'll be scared there by herself."

To the primitive brain of the old Texan, who trusted nothing so much as a horse, the uncertain raftage of the previous day had made the carts seem riskier than the back of a swimming horse. For that reason he had decreed that Taisie Lockhart should remain until the very last. His plan now was revealed.

"Miss Taisie," said he, when at length he had regained the take-off, "you've seen us all cross there time and again. It's perfectly safe for a good swimming horse like yours. I'm a-going to cross you like we done everything else. I'm a-going on ahead my own

self, and put Del and Cal above and below you, with ropes to your saddle, so's to steady you if anything should happen. There ain't no cows now. Just keep your hands off your bridle; don't try to guide your horse none at all. You mustn't look down at the water, for if you do you think you are going downstream, when you ain't. Just you look on ahead, right at the top of my hat; then you'll be perfectly safe. Us men ain't going to let nothing happen to you."

The girl was pale, but the family courage and the traditions of the border were her own. She got into saddle without a word and spurred the snorting Blancocito directly into the curling waters when Nabours gave the word. It seemed to her to be facing death. She resigned her soul.

But suddenly she felt under her a certain lightness, accompanied with a throbbing vibration—movement, progress. She knew her horse was swimming. On ahead, Jim Nabours sat as though upon the surface of the tawny water, the top of his saddle cantle showing over the streaming tail of his horse, which swam on, steadily and confidently, after the gallant fashion of the Texas strain. She looked right and left. Two other men were advancing also strangely over the water, only the upper portion of their bodies visible. It was like some fantastic dream.

In absolute silence they crossed the swimming channel, saw the face of the sand bar come nearer, as though it were approaching upstream across the swirling flood. Fifty yards, thirty yards, twenty yards—they would be safe! And then came one more jest of the immortal gods! It was an accident made more readily possible

by the mistaken attempt of using guide ropes on a swimming horse.

A great tree, uprooted somewhere unknown miles to the westward, came rolling and dipping its snaggled branches. The men saw it perfectly well, and coolly made ready to meet the danger, each man with hand at his reata.

Impossible to predict the freak of the changing current! A bared root of the tree caught at the edge of the bar. The heavy trunk swung down toward Dalhart, who had the upstream side. Nabours was now ahead, on the bar. His back was turned. He was looking curiously at the man they all had seen approaching through the shallow water from the farther bank.

The cool-headed plainsman, Dalhart, gave length to his rope, flipped it to free it of the one menace, an upstanding snag which would not allow the rope to clear. But in some way, no one could tell how, a roll of the menacing leviathan threw the snag a little higher. The drag of the rope in the water did the rest. The rope fouled on the snag. As a consequence, the horse of Taisie was drawn directly in front of the log as it swept downstream. A scream, shouts. In a flash the girl's pony was trying to get his forelegs over the log. The girl herself, thrown or slipping out of the saddle, was in the water; and all of them, horses, riders, with the giant log, were steadily swept down below the head of the bar.

The sudden disaster concentrated all the world into an immediate surface of eddying, onward water, coffee colored, and the narrow strip of wet sand edging it. The scene was not fifty feet across, so near were the

swimmers to the one trace of land. Beyond that limit, for the participants existed no horizon and no use for eye or ear. Nabours had some indefinite, vague sense that the wet noise of a horse's advance through the shallow back of him was close, now directly at his back; but to turn his head from the tragedy at his hand was not possible as even an instant's thought; so that when the hurrying horseman appeared at his side, as though dropped from the sky, it seemed quite natural enough.

The quick cast of his own rope fell short from where he sat his horse, with footing on the bar. Those in the water had only their own powers now. There was no conscious plan on Taisie Lockhart's part, or that of the two swimming men; no one could tell how it all had happened, or what now must happen. But suddenly the girl felt herself caught in the strong grasp of Del Williams, himself dismounted, swimming. He dragged her into the swinging branches—across them. By then Dalhart's rope was free, and Taisie's pony, dropping back from its struggle to surmount the log, also was free, as the ponderous tree trunk swept on by. So by renewed freak of fortune, all three of the horses made the edge of the bar before it was too late. By this very fact the lives of those caught in the current were set in more instant danger.

It all was in silence. No one called for aid, supplicated; no one shouted advice, instruction; there was not a sound to the advance of death. Nabours, perhaps, held his breath thrice the usual space as he jerked in his rope, cast again.

The loop fell wide, sank; but Williams missed it,

A Paramount Picture. *North of 36.*

PREPARING TO DRIVE THE LONGHORNS ACROSS THE RIVER.

was swept down, encumbered by the current, here very strong in its rebound. The water had cut off the slope of the bar a few yards below and left a gouged channel, sharp, swift. But Dalhart's hand fell on the loop. With a groan, unable to cast again for the white face of the girl, Nabours returned, whirling his horse, gathering slack, feeling his whole life a failure now, since he had saved only a man.

Now into his consciousness came identification of the horseman who had plunged across the shallows to the harder footing of the bar, well trampled by the cattle which had passed. Of course, vaguely, generally, he had known at first loose sight that it was not any of his own men.

It was McMasters, his pistol belt wrapped around his saddle horn, his coat off and held under a leg, his reata free. He pushed down the bar—off the bar; but before his horse swam, a whirling back cast had spread the loop over the heads of the two swimmers, who, plainly, never could have made the bar.

He would have dragged them out by the neck, choked, yea or nay, had his horse held footing. As it was, he was the one of the three who had some plus power, even as his horse swam. With a desperate struggle the gallant brute got his feet on holding ground, floundered out, up. By then the loop had narrowed to the hondo. But the bit of rawhide there was gripped in Del Williams' clutch. He still held in his other arm the heavy drag of the girl's body. He did not know whether or not her eyes were closed; hoped only he had been able to keep her face high.

After that, it was quick, simple, silent. The essential

thing had been done. McMasters used the horse to drag out the take of the rope. He saw Del Williams come to his knees on the wet sand, crawling, the limp form of the girl still supported by his arm as he staggered up.

He saw her stand alone, her arms feeling out, dazed, central figure now on a stage which was a wide sea of whirling water. Whether or not she knew him he could not tell. Taisie herself could feel little of definite plan. But what McMasters saw, result of her impulse to reach the one point of safety she could sense, was her stumbling, hurrying, arms spread, to the saddle skirts of Jim Nabours, who was on the narrow strip of sand exposed by the lowered waters, hardened by the trampling it had had.

The girl, scarce able to stand, flung an arm across the old foreman's saddle front. Upon the other side Del Williams, following, suddenly reached out and caught her hand, even as Jim laid hand upon her arm to steady her. Her eyes, until now closed in terror, opened and looked straight into those of Del Williams, the man who from his own boyhood days had loved her, as she knew; who had risked his life for her now.

"I reckon you saved my life," said she weakly.

She did not specify. The man who had done the essential thing was fifty feet away. But Dalhart heard the words.

Now the tense silence of the drama's action was resolved into hurly-burly, horses plunging, splashing, snorting, men coiling ropes, all voluble in speech, undifferentiated calls, shouting, accusations.

"Come here, you!" Nabours called, beckoning to the

tall rider, apart, who was coiling his wet reata, looping securely his pistol belt, pulling a latigo around his wet coat to hold it better. But McMasters flung a hand in salutation, deprecation, for what not, or for it all.

"But come on, man!" the foreman again commanded, with what intent was not plain. The laughing voice of McMasters came, clear and seemingly not much perturbed.

"See you at Abilene!" he called. Almost the next instant he had spurred bodily into the flood.

They watched him steadily carried out and down and across by the set of the current, following the same system Nabours had first used in crossing back to the south bank. None of them knew that McMasters had from his own chosen spot watched the whole crazy operation of crossing the Red in freshet, had crossed at a better ford below, and had within the hour taken position near the camp on the far shore, whence he had seen the last departure from the south bank—and done some thinking and reasoning of his own about it.

"He'll make it all right, damn him!" said Nabours, in mixed emotions, as he watched the strange sight of a man's body, half out of water, plowing across, following a small object dark and flat ahead, surmounting a dark broken line, a V of ripples, even so, visible in the tawny descending flood.

"Well!"

He did not explain. No one explained. No one made comment. Perhaps a sort of chagrin now held them more or less, a feeling that glory lacked, that life itself had lacked here, but for the casual, unrequited

aid of a man who had come and gone after doing the essential thing.

"Help her up, Del," said Nabours. "Can you ride, child?"

Taisie nodded, got into saddle when her horse was brought across the wet bar. So she was not yet to die? The thought was curious to her, bringing not elation but surprise. She had not once spoken, had never once cried out, appealed—not so much courage as resignment to the wish of fate. And now fate had selected a certain agency to give her back to life and its lackings. She had neither joy nor sorrow in such thoughts as came.

Nabours, his hand on Blancocito's cheek strap, rode with face held down, his mouth grim. He sighed so deep it was well-nigh a groan, knowing that under his leadership two human lives had been lost, a third almost lost. Had that last consequence of his own folly ensued, what then? It had come so close he now had no perspective other than that it would have been the end of the world. And the draggled figure at his side, passive center of all the action, as woman is in all the great crises of the world, had no better perspective. The edge of the world lay at the south bank of the Red. Well, he had reached that horizon, passed once more beyond the edge of her world—that strange man.

The other two men dropped to the rear as Nabours led Taisie's horse out at the landing place. Del Williams had ridden silent. Dalhart began to abuse him.

"That'll do! The whole thing was your fault," said Williams after a time. "You let your rope foul in that log. It's a wonder you didn't drownd her. If you

say it was any part my fault, you're a damned liar, and you know it! Even thataway she'd have drownded, and me, too, if it wasn't for him." He jerked his head toward the opposite shore.

Neither man was armed, both were nearly naked. They wheeled their horses head to head and sat looking each into the other's face.

"The world ain't big enough for both us two," said Dalhart slowly.

"It shore ain't," answered the other man in even tones. "What you say suits me. We've all promised Jim there wouldn't none of us make no break until we had delivered the cows. Does that suit you?"

"Yes, till Abilene!"

"Till Abilene!"

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER WHICH FLAG?

THIRTY miles down the Red River, where it originally was crossed by the old Arbuckle Trail, early known as the Whisky Trail, Rudabaugh and his men lay encamped. They were and for some days had been impatiently awaiting news from the south. Mr. Jameson, cattle inspector for the northern district of Texas, brought them news; but Mr. Jameson, for reasons of his own, preferred to preserve his dignity; so his news was highly censored, expurgated. He declared that his horse had thrown him into a cactus patch. Moreover, he declared that the Del Sol herd was already across the river and bound north; whereas the truth was that he only had guessed that the herd soon would cross, provided that the waters fell. He had not tarried. Rudabaugh was irritated.

"You ought to have got two bits a head straight through for those cows," said he.

"They're out of our jurisdiction now," defended the thornful fugitive.

"They ain't never out of my jurisdiction!" rejoined the leader savagely. "I'll follow that outfit till hell freezes. Where there ain't no law is where Sim Rudabaugh's jurisdiction runs.

"I wish I knew where that fellow McMasters is," he added. "I'm only waiting for him."

That evening at dusk McMasters did come into camp. Rudabaugh welcomed him with as much graciousness as he could muster, but did not spare complaints over the long delay.

"None of you Texans seem to know the value of time," he began. "You can't look ahead. The herd that breaks trail for five million Texas cows ruins every plan for us if it gets to the railroad. If that herd gets through, cows will be worth ten dollars a head in Texas this fall, next year twenty dollars—and they have been costing me twenty-five cents! When cows go to twenty a head, land goes up with them. Now, it don't take any watchmaking to figure why I don't want those things to happen just yet.

"McMasters, that herd must never get out of the Nations. We've got to have this season to finish our plans. I don't intend to have my hand forced by any red-head girl and her red-neck cow hands, I can tell you that. Let that bunch trail north this summer, and they'll make a market for every cow in Texas! If they don't get north Sim Rudabaugh'll be the richest man that ever set foot on Texas soil. And what do you suppose Texas will do for a man who can prove that he has doubled and trebled and quadrupled the price of every acre and every cow inside the lines of Texas? In that case, Mr. Rudabaugh might be able to look wider than the lines of Texas, eh?"

"Your plans do seem large," said McMasters quietly. "How can I help you in them?"

"Every way in the world. Scout out on ahead. It's hard for me to keep my fingers on you, you shift about so much; but if you help me break up the T. L. herd

there'll be everything in it for you that you will ever want in life.

"Of course, you know I kept awful quiet. It's a long way out to the edge of the Staked Plains, and only a few cowmen are in there now. But the lands I have got my eye on are covered with vine mesquite like a carpet, or with bunch grass almost as good. That's the coming cattle range, once the Comanches are off of it. That's where I am locating our lands. I want a million acres more of scrip.

"And to think," he added, "what all of that hangs on! Leave them alone and they may find Abilene, for all I know. I am taking no chances about that—that's why I want you. I want you to go on north and find that outfit.

"We'll cross the river in the morning."

Again he resumed his pacing and his cursing, in one of the moods during which he really was out of his own mind. He was well in his cups almost all the time.

McMasters turned toward him suddenly.

"You carry fire a long time, don't you?" said he.

"I never had any one oppose me yet that didn't get the worst of it," replied the outlaw, ever serene in his conceit.

McMasters smiled.

"Not even Burleson Lockhart?"

"Not even Burleson Lockhart," rejoined Rudabaugh savagely. "He did!"

He pulled up. Something chill seemed to sit in the air about him. "Well, come into camp," said he, "and let's have a snort of liquor. I have got some left."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MURDER

RUDABAUGH and his band, early on the following morning, broke camp and crossed the Red River, finding no difficulty in making the ford at the old Whisky Trail. They rode a dozen strong, alcoholically buoyant, defiling the air with their boastful blasphemies.

McMasters had suggested that they keep together and follow the old Arbuckle Trail up the Washita, their course making one side of a triangle whose other leg probably would be covered by the Del Sol herd. The two courses naturally would converge somewhere to the north and west, at some point on the Washita. He pointed out that in no case could they miss the Del Sol men, because certainly they would see the northbound trail if they came to it, and could wait if they did not. The logic of this appealed sufficiently to Rudabaugh.

At the end of their first day's march they stopped at the edge of a walnut grove through which ran a little stream. All that country was full of game, and Rudabaugh took up his rifle, promising soon to come back with meat for the company. McMasters himself, unobserved, followed not far behind him.

Rudabaugh had been gone perhaps a quarter of an hour or so when his mates heard two reports of his

rifle in the direction of the stream. He came in not long after, but without any game.

"Well, Dave," said one of his men, "did you get your meat?"

"I certainly did," answered the ruffian.

"You didn't bring it in?"

"It ain't that kind of meat."

They stood looking at him. His smile was distorted. He began to work himself into one of his rages.

"Well, you heard my promise!" he broke out. "Down yonder I told you that I intended to kill the first Indian I saw in the Nations. I don't bluff and I don't miss—there's two Indians laying in there. If you don't believe it go and look. I told you I'd show those people how to steal my horses."

A man or two slipped out of the camp, moved over toward the edge of the little stream. Hard men they were, and used to rough deeds; but what they saw made them start back shuddering.

Two Indian women, one young, lay upon the farther bank. Their clothing remained upon the nearer shore. They had been bathing, and hearing the approach of an intruder had started up the farther bank. There they had been overtaken by the aim of the most heartless ruffian that ever crossed even that dark and bloody land. The older woman now lay dead, the younger even yet was struggling to reach the cover of the thicket. Hearing the sound of yet others coming, she fell forward on her face. . . . They both were women, and had the younger woman lived——

McMasters, following close behind Rudabaugh, was not close enough to see him when he fired, but soon he

saw what had been done. Horrified, he turned away, leaving the men he met to see for themselves. He picked up the moccasins the women had left on the hither bank.

His step was light as that of a panther when he entered the camp. He crossed the grass to where Rudabaugh now sat, and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Get up, you damned hound!" he said. "Get up and look a man in the face, you beastly, murdering coward!"

Rudabaugh reached for his weapon before he struggled upright, but stayed his hand in time. The two hands of the younger man were raised above the dark revolver stocks. But he did not fire.

"The man who would do a thing like that is no part of a man at all!" Rudabaugh and all his remaining men heard the words. "I'll not ride a foot with a murderer like you. Now take my advice—get out of here fast as you can! If these people catch up with you they'll even things with you—their village can't be far from here. Those women never harmed you."

"You all heard my word!" Rudabaugh's voice broke hoarsely.

"You've heard mine! I ought to kill you now, but I am going to leave you."

"The lousy thieves!" Rudabaugh tried to work up his vanished rage. "You think I'll let them steal my horses and get away with it? It's two less of them. Besides, there's no law in here. Besides, you're going to break your own word."

The eye of McMasters narrowed.

"Don't say that again," said he. "I am saving you for a later day. Those were Comanches that you killed."

"They're not Comanches!" asserted Rudabaugh. "The Comanches don't range in here. It's all Chickasaws above here. They were Chickasaws, or maybe Wacos."

Dan McMasters held up two moccasins before he replaced them in his pocket.

"I know Comanche moccasins when I see them," said he. "Those women left these when they went into the water.

"There is no use your trying to trail me," he added, as he backed to the edge of the wood where his horse was tethered. "I tell you, the best thing you can do is to get out of here as fast as you can!"

There was not a man in all that armed band that had courage to reach hand to weapon as he passed. Perhaps a sullen contempt for their leader had come to them. Rudabaugh's own blasphemies, his sudden recovery of his weapons came too late. McMasters was in saddle and riding, hid by the cover of the wood.

At first they thought he had headed for the north, as they later trailed his horse. But half a mile farther on they saw where he had turned in his tracks and headed directly south.

"I don't know where he went," remarked one trailer, "but I wish I did. He's likely to be mad enough to set the Rangers after us again. I more'n half believe right now that he had a hand in their catching us down at Del Sol. If we'd got away with all that scrip Ruda-

baugh says there was we'd have been out of this, maybe."

"The Rangers can't work anywhere outside the state of Texas," his associate reminded him.

"No, that's so; they can't. But the Comanches can!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE KILLER

IT was high noon of the third day north of the Red River; a frank spring noon on the prairies. All the morning nothing except the countless wild game had offered life and motion to the eye of Jim Nabours, scouting carefully ahead of the herd. But now, as he topped a gentle rise, he saw coming toward him from the cover of a clump of distant timber the figure of a rider whom soon he knew to be a white man. He pulled up, sat intent. The rider seemed a not unfamiliar figure.

The horseman advanced directly toward him, evidently seeing him. As he approached more closely in his steady trot he flung up his right hand in the sign of peace.

Nabours himself rode out to meet the stranger. All at once he halted sharply, his hand on his gun. But the other paid no attention to the hostile movement, came up at the same pace.

"How are you, Jim Nabours?" said he quietly. He dropped both his hands to his own saddle horn.

A scowl came over the foreman's face.

"You have broke your word, Mr. McMasters," said he. "You are in a risky place right now."

"I come with my hands up," said McMasters. "I'm

in no more risk than you are. But I am going back with you to your own camp."

"No! We want no truck with you." Then a sense of the proprieties coming to him, he added, "You're counting too damn much on what you done down at the Red. No one ast you."

"Look at my horse," said McMasters quietly. "He's a Fishhook, isn't he? Yes. And I have been back of this herd or alongside of it for three hundred and fifty miles. You know that you got my letter, and you seem to have followed my advice. You've done very well by it. You'd have done a lot better if I'd been with you before you tried that crossing."

"Well, we put you out of our camp oncet. We meant it. We hain't held no trial sence then. I haven't ast you in, no time."

"Yes; but you don't seem to be able to keep me out. I'll ride this country the way I like, and not even Texans can keep me from it. I have come now because I think you need me again, and need me very much."

He told his news. The features of Nabours changed as he listened.

"My God!" said he. Then, suspicion dominant again: "But you was traveling with them people. You went right from us to them. Now here you're back."

"I need travel with them no more. I have got what I was after. I know who killed my father and Miss Lockhart's father. I am coming into your camp, and I am going to talk with Miss Lockhart."

"She sont you out oncet. We tried you. She won't talk to you—no, not even after what you done. She's never mentioned your name about that." Nabours still

sat looking at him uneasily. "Besides, my men won't let you in again."

"No? I have been in your camp more than once since you first put me out."

"Not that I know of, you haven't."

"No? Jim, who killed that man near the women's carts the night of the big run on the Colorado?"

"I don't know who killed him; I only know he was dead."

"Well, that man was after the trunk you thought that I had stolen. Rudabaugh wants that trunk. He sent his boldest man after it that night. I was a little ahead of him, that was all. You know what happened to him. Now you know who did it. Yes, you might say I stole Miss Lockhart's trunk and put it in my wagon. But I stole it from Rudabaugh, not from her. What I said at the trial was true. Theft from her—why, good Heavens!"

He suddenly spread out his hands.

"I'm a killer now, Jim!" said he, his face strangely drawn by a smile that could not come to it. "I can't turn back now. The man who says I ever was a friend of Rudabaugh is a liar, and a fool besides. I call that to you here. I will call it to your whole campful just the same."

"Them's right strong words," said Jim Nabours quietly. "I only listen because I more'n half believe you're right. I can't answer what you say. But why in hell didn't you say all this at the trial?"

"Trial! Who gave you any right to try a McMasters of Gonzales? I took what you-all gave me because I thought it might make it easier for me to stay away."

"Well, I don't know what you mean by that."

"No; and I don't know that I can make you understand. Let me say, I realized that my path and hers could never run together.

"But you're in the Indian Nations now. There are three hundred Comanches in here somewhere north of you that have come in from the Plains to visit with the Kiowas. That's Yellow Hand's band. If you meet those Comanches after what they surely will hear—why, I suppose, you might maybe be willing to have a good killer along with you.

"I supposed maybe you'd be thankful to get this word in time. So, to that extent, you see, my path does once more run for a little way not far from hers. Maybe she'll talk to me. I'm going to see. You can't any of you stop me. You've all been ignorant fools. You deserve nothing."

"I used to read my Bible, in Sunday school," said Nabours after a long silence. "I done read about that there, now, Rachel—was it?—same name, she had, as Cohen's wife down to Gonzales, of the Golden Eagle Store. Now Jacob, he was a good cow hand, and he worked seven years night wrangling for said Rachel—maybe her name was Rebecca, I don't know. Well, anyhow, I reckon, maybe it was all right about Jacob and the ranch boss. The trouble with me is, I got too damned many Jacobs along already in this here outfit. I wasn't studying to take on no more.

"Still, when the men hear about old Yellow Hand it's more'n likely they'll be glad to pick up a hand that can throw lead if he has to. Come on in. I won't let

nobody start nothing. We can dig into this further along."

McMasters paid no attention to the other men about the camp that evening, who, even after the foreman's explanation, remained sullen and aloof. Without asking consent, he walked to the cook-cart plunder, unearthed his own bed roll and war bag and chose a place for himself outside the circle appropriated by the other hands. He made such toilet as he could, helped himself at the cook's kettle and pans—breaking a two days' fast—all without converse with the men who once had adjudged him unfit for their association. And in the twilight he walked without any by-your-leave directly to the camp of Taisie Lockhart and her servants. They watched him go. She saw him coming in the dusk; she felt her heart leap strangely. How could she keep her face calm, her eyes severe?

"It is Mr. McMasters?" she spoke coldly, did not put out her hand. He had remained silent, his own face sad enough. "Why do you come—how dare you come?"

She had not asked him to be seated; was treating him as though he were one of the hands; as though he were her enemy, not her hereditary friend or ally, not a man who had saved her life but now. It was hard even for his courage to endure. Something at last gave way. When he spoke a resonance was in his voice which she had never known before.

"Dare? Why did I dare come? I dared not stay away!"

"You always presume on obligations I never asked of you. But I can't see—I don't know——"

"You know I love you; that's the thing I can't help. You couldn't help knowing it. I am the man who kissed you that night in the dark—yes, I did that. You knew! I won't tell you why I was there that night, or why I am here now. Forget what happened the other day at the river—you'd as well. The woman who doubts me once is done with me forever."

She could not speak to this new man, savage, impetuous, the chill all gone from him.

"Dare? I do dare! I dare tell you that there will never be any other woman in the world for me. I'll never be even the last man in the world for you."

Doubt, contrition, fear—a horrible fear that she had been cruelly unjust, a yet more terrible fear that he was going away—all mingled in the mind of the girl who heard him.

"I cannot possibly understand how you could come. I don't know why you should. Always you put a load on me." Her own voice had been more certain at other times.

His answer came very slowly.

"A man has an indefeasible right to tell the one woman in the world that he cares for her, even if he is going to the gallows. I might as well be on my way to the gallows, so far as any chance with you is concerned. Chance? Why, a chance with you? I'd not give myself one if I could. Look at my hands!"

He extended his hands, long, slender, well kept, so that she might see.

"I am a killer!" said Dan McMasters bitterly.

"That's what I have become for sake of Texas, for sake of the law, for sake of women and children, I suppose. But no woman or child for me! It's worse to be a killer than it is to be killed. Well I know that. But I was mad that night. I just thought of what might have happened to you."

"Sir, this is not easy to listen to!" She sank back on her rude fireside seat, trembling. "I wish you had not come! I wish I had never seen you!"

"I can say the same! But why do you wish that? It's easy to forget me. But I cannot forget."

He stepped closer, his voice low. She only shook her head from side to side and would not speak.

"Why?" he demanded again fiercely; and still she answered not at all.

"You have nothing to forget," he went on. "It may be easy for women to forget—I don't know. But it is my curse that I can never change—I can't forget. What I want I must have—I can't change!" He sighed. His hands dropped, still crooked to clasp her, to grasp her arms, and hold her fast.

"Well, say that I come to you now only as a peace officer to-night. I have used my own methods. That's all the life work there is for Daniel McMasters. There is no possible reward for me except to come to you some time and tell you that I have finished the work I started out to do."

She sat, her head bowed forward in her hands. A cricket was calling loudly in the grass. Presently she heard the man's even voice go on.

"I know who killed your father and mine. I could have killed Rudabaugh three days ago. I ought to have

done so. I was on the point of killing him. What kept me from it? I knew that some one of his men would kill me if I did, but that ought not to have mattered—I don't think it would have mattered; we have to take those chances in my business. Why did I hold back? Why did I wait for another time? I'll have to tell you! Suddenly I thought, 'If these men kill me now I'll never see her face again!' Wasn't it silly?

"I reckon I wanted to see your face again. I'd not be honest if I did not tell you that. I, McMasters of the Rangers, held back—for that! But this will be the last time. I came to your camp—it was a hard thing for a proud man to do. Well, now you know why I dared."

"Won't you be seated, sir?" Taisie's voice came faintly.

"No; you speak too late. I must go. But before I go I shall tell you once more, so you may remember it always—I love you more than anything else and everything else in all the world. There'll never be any other woman for me."

"Then, why, why?" she demanded hoarsely. "What is it that you mean when you say that you must go—that you never will——"

The cricket in the grass was asserting himself loudly, insistently.

"Life is short for me," he answered. "It may be long for you. Why should I pretend, who am about to die?"

His voice was relentless. He carried always the feeling of relentlessness, of an unemotional, unconditional coldness in purpose. An icy man, a terrible man, even now.

Again the cricket, for a little space. The firelight was but faint.

Suddenly he sank on his knees beside her, one hand on the bed roll that made her seat, so that he could look into her face. But her hands covered it. He touched her hand. It was wet with tears. Slowly he drew back.

"What have I said? What have I done?"

"Ah, you should be content!" she broke out presently. "You have your revenge!"

"What do you mean? I can't well stand to hear you say that. Revenge?"

"Yes! Very well, I called you a thief once. Let that go. You are one now."

He was entirely silent for a long space, trying to understand. Then she felt her fingers caught in a clasp like steel.

"Have I stolen anything I ought not to have taken? Tell me! Believe me, that one thing I never dreamed! I never thought that you—that you did—that you ever could! You don't! You cannot! That can never be! That's not possible! There are many men in the world for you—all of them—for you. I said only that there was no other woman but you in all the world for me. I didn't ask or expect even justice, even mercy, from you!"

"You are avenged!" said Anastasie Lockhart again. "It is noble of you! You—you reason well! You come in the night!"

After all, how could they avoid youth, evade love? In some way, when or how, neither of them knew, they were standing. He had caught her up, they were face

to face, body to body. Their arms found themselves about each other. He felt her arms about his neck, his shoulders; to her his clasp was like steel. He saw her face, pale, wet, wholly adorable, irresistible, a woman of a million. She saw his eyes, studious, marveling, frowning, his face one she never had seen before. It was done. It was too late.

He struggled as though to put off a mask, as though some armor coat oppressed him. Their lips met as though they dreamed; they did not know of plan at all, were as two dazed, beyond volition, beyond right or wrong.

It was he who drew back, half sobbing, still wrestling with that something, now that it was too late. He felt the swift rush of her awakened impetuous woman emotion, strong and sudden as though some dam had been disrupted to let an unmeasured torrent through; felt her arms slide back along the sides of his neck, her hands catch the sides of his face as they parted. Her face was not that of a country girl kissed merrily by some swain, or evilly; it was high, serious, not illusioned, calm; the face of a great soul in a splendid beauty, a woman of a million; a face terrible and young, as was his own.

There were no tears now. The great hour, the one instant for two strong natures had arrived—had passed. If any theft were done it had been done.

"You were a savage, a criminal!" said she after a time, voicing that. "But what is done is done, and what is written is written. Many men? Where? And I think I shall hate you now."

She heard his voice as of a man musing, chanting to

himself: "I was strong! You are taking my strength away.

"Do you want me to break my vow to my state?" He groaned after a time. "Would you ruin a man? Do you want me killed before my day's over? I love you, and it cannot be."

"I suppose not." Her voice dreamed. "I said, you are avenged. But I suppose I was wrong about—about calling you a thief. That trial—I suppose I ought to tell you——"

"That's too late! I told you, I can never change. That's my curse—I can't change. My honor is as good as you are good, and I know you are. But you doubted me once. It was forever. I don't know how to forgive that, for man or woman. And even if you hadn't, I'm not for you. Unclean! Unclean! Look at my hands—they're red, I say. Look at yours—white, sweet, good."

He choked, struggled; could no more than crush her hands to his lips.

"It's not for us!" he said at last. "Yes, I'm a thief. I'm almost a coward. I did not know. I'll never ask you to forgive me. Let me go. Let me finish my work. If I live, when I'm old and done and crippled, let me come and kiss the hem of your garment. There are—there must be—other men. They say there's more than one love, for a woman. I don't know. I reckon that's not true. Oh, if I could only change!"

But even so he could not go. Frowning, he caught her face in his steel-like hands once more, and at the flame ripple of her hair above her temple kissed her again and again and yet again where he had seen

her cup her hand over the first kiss he gave her—stolen also—in the dark.

He was gone. What comfort for her now? Or what for him? There is no such thing as fairness in love between man and woman.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE INDIAN NATIONS

NO blue smoke rose against the far horizon of the wild paradise through which these pioneers of a new industry were passing. Civilized, semi-civilized, even savage mankind lacked then in the Nations. The country was unsettled and unknown. The men of Del Sol neither followed nor intersected any trail of hoof or wheel. Only the deep paths of the buffalo, immemorial, marked the green carpet of unbroken sod. There never had been hoof of any domestic creature here. The bands of horses that swept away were wild horses. Wild deer, wild antelope made their only neighbors. There was not a weed. There was not a bee. The white man had not come.

Of them all, not one Del Sol man had any idea of the country ahead. They were only holding to the easiest way, the ridges that separated the heads of divergent streams.

Nabours held his silence as long as he could, but at length spurred up to the morose and solitary man who rode without a word regarding the herd, himself or his own plans.

"Mr. McMasters," said he, "I don't know where we are right now. I don't know where we're going. We haven't got no map. I don't know when Rudabaugh

may jump us. It's time you and me got plumb serious."

"Yes, I think so."

"For instance, we ain't on no Chisholm Trail?"

"No, that's over in east, if it can be called a trail. Fort Sill—that's what they call the camp where the soldiers stop, in west toward the Wichita Mountains—is the nearest white settlement. It's only a camp; there is no actual Army post there yet."

"My notion, soldiers mostly ride around and don't do nothing much."

"They'd do more if they were let alone by the Indian Department. Those men are doing what Captain Marcy advised fifteen years ago—figuring on an Army post north of the Red, to watch the Comanches.

"The worst Comanches, as you know, are the Quahrada bands—that's old Yellow Hand. Their right range is north of the Buffalo Gap and west into the Staked Plains; that's their big buffalo country. But I think word has gone out for some kind of a council between them and the Kiowas, and that's what has brought Yellow Hand in here.

"The policy of the Indian Department now, as you may know," he went on explaining, "is to round up all these Indian tribes and get them on reservations. That's going to mean war, next year probably. This whole country in here is just as like as not to be on foot right now. The best hope we've got is that none of them get together with Rudabaugh."

"That's fine, ain't it? And you done told me that Rudabaugh was heading in ahead to meet us."

"He doesn't know where we are any more than we

know where he is. If we keep on north and he keeps on up the Washita we'd naturally intersect at the crossing of the Washita, two or three days' drive north of here. I don't know which will get there first. He travels light."

"What d'you think I'd ought to do?" demanded Nabours, after a time.

"There is not much you can do. When you go into camp every night set your wagon tongue so that it points toward the North Star. Line out on that course the next morning. Keep on going north for a month. What comes, comes. But keep your herd closed up."

"Well, I done sont my cook cart on ahead a ways," admitted Nabours. "I told Sam to kill a buffalo and pick out a good camping place, if it looked anything like a bed ground."

"What comes, comes," said McMasters once more.

They separated, since he would talk no more. He rode apart from the herd, would accept no duties, no friendships, never cast a glance toward the closed cart where Taisie had taken refuge.

Nabours hardly had resumed his place at the head of the column before he found cause enough for actual alarm. On ahead there was coming toward him the white top of the cook cart, its oxen lashed to a gallop by the negro driver. Buck made no attempt to stop his vehicle, but thundered by with the evident intention of getting as far to the rear as possible. The shrieks of Milly, who had gone on in the cart, rose continuously. Nabours was obliged to ride ahead to bring the cart to a halt.

"What in hell do you mean by this?" demanded he of the frightened negro.

"Fo' Gawd, Massa Jim, don't go up dah! Dey's five thousand Injuns right up dah! Dey's a million buffaloes not two mile ahead, beyant the woods, and them Injuns is a cuttin' and a chargin'!"

"Go on down to the other cart and pull up close!" commanded the trail boss. "Hurry, now!" He spurred off to the point of the herd.

"Throw 'em off the trail, men!" he called out. "Make the herd right here! Injuns! Get your rifles out!"

In ten minutes the strip of prairie was covered a half mile deep with a mass of cattle, and the remuda was closed up at the rear. The men made a rude laager of the bed rolls in front of the carts and ordered the women to keep hid. So far as might be, they were ready for what must come.

It came soon. The cattle shuffled as they stood, turned, raised their heads. A thunder of countless hoofs grew loud, louder. And now became visible, close at hand, one of the wild spectacles of the tribesmen's country. A vast black mass of running buffalo appeared, strung out in little clumps as far as the eye could reach. Heads down, their beards sweeping the grass tops, they ran, an endless series of black, rolling forms, in a tremendous momentum that shook the very sod—the wildest picture of a wild world.

The men who immemorially owned that world were here. Naked horsemen clung on the flank of the herd. It was the Comanches, at the savage trade which the

Comanches most loved and best practiced—that of lancing the wild buffalo.

A half hundred, perhaps a hundred riders, stretched out in a long line—in fact a line two miles or more in length. The savages, stripped to the waist, rode their bareback horses alongside and into the detached masses of black which stretched west and north out as far as the horizon. Even in the distance and in the dust they might have been known to be Comanches, since they thus were at work with the lance. That was always the favorite Comanche weapon in the buffalo hunt.

Nothing imaginable could be more cruel or more efficient than their trade as these wild riders now were practicing it. Each spearman rode even with his chosen quarry. It was not his purpose to strike it in the vitals, but only to disable it. A hunter leaned sideways suddenly, plunging, both his arms raised. A lunge, a heave backward to wrench the point clear, and the great beast fell, cut through the loins; not killed at once, but sure to fall; which was enough for the savage workman. The old men or squaws following after with their bows and arrows would finish what the long lances had begun. To the rear a mile-long line of black struggling blots lay on the grass. But the blood lust of the riders had not yet been glutted.

Their chase was now to end. Their attention, rapt as they had been in the pursuit they loved above all others, could not now escape the sudden sound which broke upon their ears even over the hoof roar of the buffalo.

In a vast rush of crackling hoofs and rattling horns the entire Del Sol herd was now off in the wildest

stampede any of the men had ever seen. Worst of all, they were not undertaking to evade but to join the stampede of the buffalo.

Always there was a sort of affiliation between the wild and the domestic cattle of the Plains; and all old plainsmen knew how difficult it was to separate the two, once they were commingled. This commingling of wild and half wild, with the attendant rumbling and trembling under the hoofs of all these thousands of running creatures, made a swift climax to the scene. The black mass, lengthened and strung out by the impact of the line of hunters, now was joined by a vast influx of lighter colored animals, coming in at an angle. Red men might take toll of this. White men could not control it. No men could stop it now.

The savages had ridden long. There was an endless line of black blots rising and falling on the prairies back of them. The stampede of the Del Sol herd was sufficient to break the trance of slaughter.

Spears in hand, naked, their arms red to the shoulders, their bodies red to the waist, a group of the riders broke away from their chase and came up, grinning and shouting, to where they saw the white men huddled. They had taken their time. The Comanches entertained but little fear of the whites. They were insolent lords of the far Southwest, raiding the feeble Mexicans as they liked and even imperiously telling the Anglo-Saxon frontiersman when he must cease advancing or even pull back his frontier lines. They always had held the best of the cattle range as well as the best of the buffalo range of Texas, and had kept the cowman out.

These had no fear now of the whites. They carried with them proof of that. Repeating their own tribal history of grim sense of humor, at some sutler's store looted far to the west they had practiced one of the jests they had been known to employ in early border times. They had gathered bolts of flannel, bales of gaudy calico, from which they had liberally taken decorations for their horses. Not one of the latter that did not have attached to his mane and tail such strips of calico as long and rough riding had left him. It was the pleasant Comanche practice to tie one end of a bolt of cloth or calico to the tail of a horse and then to ride off, leaving the fabric to unwind as it listed and the horse to run as it chose. These wild decorations, unknown of origin, still clung in colored fragments to the blood-stained ponies which they rode. The ends of the prints fluttered in the prairie wind, mocking the flowers in their own remaining hues.

No herd of cattle could have withstood the sight of this wild phantasmagoria. The men who owned these felt that their own time had come. Without command, each man dropped low behind his bed roll, his rifle resting above his bent arm.

"Don't let them in, men—but don't shoot yet! They've got nothing but spears!"

It was the voice of Dan McMasters which arose. He alone of them all was standing, rifle in hand. He threw up his hand in the command to halt as the Red men came on in, slapping his rifle stock.

The Comanches paid little attention to any command, but made no immediate motion of hostility. Their leader was a great-chested man with wide chin

and mouth and narrow eyes. Jabbering in his own tongue, two-thirds Spanish, he grinned as he came on close up to the rifles which covered him and his men. At length he threw up his own hand carelessly, indifferently, curiously, as though he now would see what was to be found hereabouts.

"How, *amigo!* How, *amigo*!" called out McMasters. No one had chosen him as leader, but none now denied him the place. "*Usted* Yellow Hand?"

The leader rode out carelessly.

"*Si,*" said he. "Me Yellow Han'. *Habla Español?*"

"*Si,*" replied McMasters, and went on in that tongue.

After a few moments of rapid talk he turned.

"He says they are Quahradas, but are riding through, going home. Says he wants some spotted buffaloes. Says they are on Indian land and we have got to get out. Says we will have to give him half our horses and all our tobacco. Says he knows we have got something in the wagons because we keep the covers tight. Says we can't go on through, but have got to go back."

"You tell him to go to hell!" broke out Jim Nabours. "Tell him I know who he is. Yellow Hand has got no right in here. Tell him the soldiers will be after him for chasing the Chickasaws' buffalo. Flour—beef—tobacco? Tell him we won't give him a damned thing! Tell him if he rides ten feet further in we'll open fire and clean 'em out—our rifles shoot a week and we don't have to load."

He patted the stock of the rifle which he held up before him in defiance—one of the Henry repeating rifles, first of repeating arms seen in the Southwest after the Civil War; and already the Comanches knew

what these repeating rifles meant. Old Yellow Hand also knew that his men had nothing but their spears. He traded Comanche lives as dear as possible always. No doubt it occurred to him that he could get all the beef he wanted by following the stampede. Perhaps he figured that night time would be a better hour for an attack—when all his warriors were on hand.

"Heap shoot!" called out Jim Nabours, again slapping the side of his rifle. Yellow Hand grinned pleasantly.

"How! How! Heap *amigo,*" said he. He advanced a foot or so, his hand outstretched. "What you got in *carreta? Que tienez?*"

He motioned toward the closed fronts of the cart covers, pointing with his spear. McMasters' rifle barrel struck up the spear shaft. Yellow Hand could see the hammers of the rifles lying down like the heads of so many rattlesnakes. He could see the light shining on the brass plates of these Henry rifles. Comanches on the Concho had told him that a rifle which had this yellow spot on it would keep on shooting forever without any need for loading again.

"Si, seguro!" he now said calmly. "Heap shoot!" He waved a hand towards the rifles. *"Muy grande escopetas.* Heap swap. *Uno caballo por uno escopeta!"* He meant he would trade a horse for a repeating rifle.

"Nada, damn your soul!" broke out Jim Nabours: "You vamose pretty damn *pronto!* I'm sorry I ever learned your damned language, but you hear me now. *A doondey usted*—where'd you come from here?"

"Nos vamenos, si," said Yellow Hand ingratiatingly. *"Poco tiempo.* Swap?"

"You've got a gall," rejoined Nabours, whose blood now was up as he began to think of what had happened to his herd. "Git on out or I'll kill you for luck!"

The chieftain turned towards McMasters, whom he again addressed in Spanish. McMasters replied quietly, evenly, evidently arguing and pointing out certain facts which ought to be observed; which facts had to do with spears as against repeating rifles; with buffalo as against beef.

After a time Yellow Hand turned back to his followers, who had sat their horses impatiently. He spoke a few words in explanation. Then, without paying any more attention whatever to the whites, they all turned and rode away.

For the time safe, the white men arose and looked at one another, still almost too much strained for speech.

"Look yonder!" said Nabours at length.

Off to the west and north other Indians were appearing, group after group, evidently the followers who did the butchering of the fallen buffalo. With spears and bows and arrows they were finishing the work which had been begun. Obviously there must be some considerable village not far away, for many or most of these advancing figures were those of squaws engaged in the butchering work.

"They are in no hurry," said McMasters after a time. "They are willing to wait. Bows and arrows. They don't seem to have any guns."

The Del Sol men looked around them for the horses

which they had picketed, broke the front before the carts, where now could be heard women's lamentations. The boy, Cinquo Centavos, was disclosed sitting with his back against the cart front of his mistress, a Sharpe rifle across his knees. Tears were running down his cheeks—not tears of fear.

"My horses is all gone!" said he, sobbing.

"Hell, the cows is gone, too!" commented Dalhart. "It's lucky we ain't!"

McMasters, once banished, had now without election been received back into the ranks of the Del Sol men. Indeed, he was now their leader. Before the stripped trail drovers made any move they held council.

"Yellow Hand knows he don't have to swap," said McMasters. "He knows he can choose between dead buffalo and dead cattle. Our horses—they know what we've got in that line. They know all they want to know, except what's in there." He nodded toward the carts. "They'll come back to find that out."

The men all looked at him in silence. He spoke again, to Nabours.

"There's only one good thing about this whole thing," he said. "Rudabaugh has not seen these men. They haven't heard of the killing of those two Comanche women. If they had they'd have rushed us long ago. The women must have been in a visiting village, over toward the Arbuckle hills."

Nabours was silent for a moment.

"The jig's up. We'd just as well leave the herd," said he at length. "We can't spare men to send after them. It looks like our only hope is to push on ahead

with the carts and find a place to fight for what we've got left."

McMasters nodded.

"I think that's best. They know they've got only bows and arrows against our repeating rifles. Horses they like more than anything else. Maybe they'll be contented with rounding up our remuda if we slip away. Maybe we can come back again and pick up what they leave us. At least, they don't yet know what we have in there."

Once more he nodded toward the close-drawn flaps of the carts, to which not a man had yet ventured. They did not want the women to know. "We'd better be on our way before anything worse happens."

Nabours nodded. The broken cavalcade closed in and soon was moving north once more, now convoying nothing but the shrouded carts, around which they formed a cordon.

Unencumbered with the herd, they made a dozen miles in their hurried march, and finally chose a camping place upon a little eminence crowned with a few straggling trees, which gave them good sight of the surrounding country. They made their camp with the carts inside the circle of guards; hobbled and picketed their remaining saddle horses and put up such barricade as they could. They now had done the last that remained within their power. Nabours told the women to come to the men's camp. A fire was built, but was kept low.

Taisie Lockhart joined her men, her face exceedingly pale.

"It's the Comanches!" she broke out at last. "I have brought you into this!"

"Ma'am," said Nabours at length, "that's hardly a fair way of speaking. It's us has brought you. We all throwed in together in this."

"I told you I was broke and couldn't pay you," sobbed the girl, "and you wouldn't quit. Oh, if you only had!"

She missed one figure in the gathering of rough-clad hard-bitten men. A trifle apart, McMasters paid no attention either to her or any one else. Nabours caught the direction of her glance and nodded.

"We done taken him on the herd, full, now," said he. "We need men that can shoot. Go on back to sleep."

But Taisie Lockhart no more slept than did the others. There was no shoulder against which she could lean. The voice of the cricket was no more. In its stead came the raucous roar of the gray wolves scenting blood.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GAME OF THE GODS

ONCE upon a time the immortal gods, desirous of playing their favorite game, in which mortals are used as pawns, cast down upon the surface of the earth their great chessboard. It was simple, having but four squares. They traced a wandering and wavering line two thousand miles in length along the indefinite line btween the tall grass of the prairies and the bunch grass of the plains. It lay somewhere near what men afterwards came to call the one-hundredth meridian.

Across this line at right angles they put down yet another indefinite line to finish off their board. Since they knew nothing of geography or mathematics or politics, they did not call this line the parallel of thirty-six north. For them it was enough that it loosely divided the land of winter snows from that of winter suns. They cared not that at some time it might be the indefinite line between corn and cotton, between lean beef and fat, between breeding and feeding. They knew nothing of quarantine. It was nothing to them that had they gone one degree further north they would have established the south line of a land called by men the state of Kansas. They had never heard of the state of Kansas; or of the Missouri Compromise; or of slavery. They dealt with a great land which then and now has been forever free. Men came to call it the West.

The great east-and-west line, like the great north-and-south line, one day was to be broken down and forgotten, after the immortal gods had kept their chessboard sufficiently long to themselves and had wearied of their game. They left the chessboard to their pawns and sat back, idly watching them, smiling that the pawns knew so little of great games.

When the early herds pushed up into that unknown land from the straggling half-Spanish settlements of the Southwest men ignorantly walked over wealth which they then did not heed and did not need—the wealth that lay under the tall grasses and the short grasses. Of the bunch grass, the vine mesquite grass, and the redtop and the Eastern bluestem, they could talk understandingly. They lived in a day and land as yet pastoral. But their cattle walked over unsuspected millions of millions of gallons of oil that one day later would be needed. The rude white bandits of the nation, men even of Rudabaugh's shrewd type, themselves did not suspect the measureless measures of coal and other minerals that lay under their feet. The immortal gods smiled at them, knowing that in time they would give their pawns everything they needed, equal to their changed requirements, as age succeeded age.

Now, pawns on the great chessboard of the gods where not even pawns ever had been placed before, the ragged crew of Del Sol was pushing up, two degrees eastward of the north-and-south dividing line. They had been traveling somewhere near the ninety-

eighth meridian, of which not one of them ever had heard. Not many of them ever had heard of thirty-six-thirty, or of the Missouri Compromise. They fought a war without much history, for the rank and file, as always is the case, had but narrow horizons. They were simply cowmen; and now they were driving north. To them Abilene, their objective, was as vague a thing as had been the cities of Cibola to Coronado's men when they also once crossed the great chessboard of the immortal gods, caring not even for the grasses, so good for buffalo and cows, and also missing all the minerals that lay beneath their feet, although it was one mineral they sought.

That was in the past. The immortal gods had decided that now it was time for men to move north. There was to be a great new constructive day.

But it seems that there is implanted in Nature and in the universe the law of two opposing forces; centrifugal and centripetal; good and evil; constructive and destructive; that which feeds and is preyed upon by that which fattens; that which produces and creates, countered by that which destroys and tears down; that which sows to reap, and that which reaps where it has not sown. Therefore it was quite as much foreordained that Rudabaugh and his men should pass north to prey on the Del Sol herd as that the Del Sol herdsmen should be driving north into a new day.

Be all these things assigned such causes as they may in each man's philosophy, at the end of his nose or farther, a new epoch was at hand for the vast unsettled West. Rudabaugh and his men had discussed that

daily and nightly as they pushed on up the Washita River of the Indian Nations. They finally camped at the ford of the Washita, well in advance of the Del Sol men and directly north of them, although neither knew the proximity of the other.

The ruffian leader had no more than twenty men in his band. He had recruited these from classes naturally unscrupulous and restless under any law. But all criminal tendency is in its way a sort of individual initiative, self-assertiveness, after all; so that Rudabaugh found his men not always wholly submissive to any man's will. They were less so now than ever. Repeatedly Rudabaugh had to explain to them again and over again that they were after large game, that the division would be large per capita. They were more like Coronado's men—wanted mineral in hand; minted mineral.

"Well, I don't mind saying," remarked one of the bolder of his men at the second night of encampment at the Washita crossing—a city lies near there to-day—"I'll be free to say that I don't noways like the look of things."

Rudabaugh turned to him savagely.

"Why don't you? What's the matter with you, Baldy?"

"There wasn't no cause to kill them Indian women. If we don't keep moving, them Comanches may run into us any time."

"Where'd we move?" sneered Rudabaugh. "What are we after up here? Have I got to make a picture-block map to show you? Don't you see, you damned numskull, if that herd gets to the railroad the whole

jig is up for us? We've got to make our clean-up right now, this season or not at all, I keep telling you. We've got to get our scrip and get our lands, and get our surveyors out to locate them; and we've got to do it all now. Next year will be too late if that herd gets through. I've told you all this a dozen times. Now if you don't like my way of leading, you know what you can do. If I hear any more grumbling I know what I'll do."

None the less this spreading doubt and dissatisfaction on the part of his followers did begin to make impression upon even so hardened a soul as Rudabaugh's. He could do nothing if left alone. Looters always organize. In spite of his bravado, in spite of the quantities of fiery liquor which he had consumed, he began to feel a sudden uncontrollable chill creeping over his heart. Just now he began to pace up and down, restlessly endeavoring to work himself into one of his berserk rages. But he looked over his shoulder once in a while. No one knew what he saw, unless they themselves also saw the picture of the two naked women lying in their blood at a bathing pool.

"Damn it!" said Rudabaugh now, petulantly. "I don't see why that bunch of buzzards should pick a tree so close to light on!"

He caught up his rifle. A great black bird dropped dead from a limb a hundred yards away. The others rose clumsily, wheeled in dark caravan; but they alighted on another tree not even so far away.

"That ain't luck, I tell you," repeated the first speaker of Rudabaugh's men. "Me, I don't like the look of things."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A COLONEL OF CAVALRY

JIM NABOURS, who had known but little sleep, kicked out of his blankets before sunup and stood, grimy, haggard and moody, his hands in pockets, his hat pushed back on his head. There was no familiar sight of a great sea of longhorns rising just above the level of the grasses. The Del Sol herd was gone.

All the men finished their sodden breakfast in silence. Only the hysterical sobbings of the black woman Milly made any variation from the general taciturnity. There came no word from the tight-closed tilt flaps of the *carreta.* Del Williams and Dalhart had not spoken to each other since the crossing of the Red. McMasters paid scarce more attention to any than if they had not been there.

The sun rose red above the wet grass, climbed steadily till it seemed smaller; but it did not look down upon any mass of longhorns rising from the bedding ground. There was no long procession heading out for the north. The men of Del Sol were without an occupation.

Moody and unhappy, they sat in their bivouac, waiting. It was McMasters who spoke, suddenly pointing to the south.

"Look, Jim," said he, as he came in and touched

Nabours on the shoulder. "That's not Indians—that's cavalry!"

In five minutes proof was complete. There came into view, company front, at a stiff trot, guidon fluttering bravely, two troops of the hard-bitten United States cavalry, then stationed variously on the Plains. An officer rode in advance. As he came closer there showed near him the headdress of an Indian warrior, whether guide, scout or captive, none could say.

In the sudden relief from their long strain, and under the influence of this spectacle of riding men, always inspiriting, the men of Del Sol rose and gave a ragged shout of welcome to the Yellow Legs. The leader rode straight on in without any salute or reply; a grim, grizzled man of forty years or more, in the Western uniform of our Army when it was at its best. He dismounted stiffly, came up with military stiffness, stood on one leg stiffly, looking for the leader. He kept with him his Indian companion. The Del Sol men now saw that it was the Comanche chieftain, Yellow Hand, the partisan of yesterday's affair.

"Good morning, men," said the cavalry leader. "I am Colonel Griswold, from the Sill cantonment down below. What're you doing here in the Nations?"

"Good morning," said Jim Nabours, stepping forward. "We are shore glad to see you colonel. Well, we ain't doing a hell of a lot of anything right now. Yesterday we was a-driving thirty-six hundred and fifty-nine fours and mixed stuff north to Alberlene. That was afore we met yore friend there. We was just a-strolling through."

"Well, this old thief was just a-strolling through,

I was following him. Last night I saw they had some fresh beef hides as well as buffalo in their camp. One thing led to another. I took your trail.

"They rather busted up your herd, eh? Well, I brought Yellow Hand along on the chance that he might be useful.

"Where do you men come from?" he continued. "Don't you know that driving cattle across the Indian Nations is the foolishest thing in the world?"

"It looks thataway now, colonel," assented Jim Nabours. "We come from Caldwell County, Texas, five hunderd miles south of here."

"You're not trading with the tribes in any way?"

"No, sir, we don't want no truck with them."

"Got no whisky along?"

"Good God, no!" replied Nabours soulfully. "I wisht we had."

"H'm," said the army officer, looking toward the fire. "You got any coffee left?"

"Some. Set in," said the foreman simply.

So invited, Sandy Griswold, seasoned colonel of cavalrymen, made himself at home, a tin of coffee in his hand. His eye took in the arrangement of the scant equipment of these cattle drovers. He noted the giant carts, their covers drawn tight. He noted also when the flaps of the nearest cart cover parted, and some one—at first he thought it was a young man—began to climb down from the lofty seat via the cart tongue.

"Hello, what's that?" said Sandy Griswold suddenly. "That's no man—that's a woman!"

"Shore she is," said Jim Nabours. "She owns the cows. She's going through to Aberlene."

By now Taisie Lockart, in blue shirt and checkered trousers, boots and wide hat—her only apparel—was approaching the men. The officer arose, hat in hand. Jim Nabours made such clumsy introduction as he could. The soldier's eyes were running over the trim, straight, round figure of this astonishing apparition. He saw the great club of bound bright hair, the easy lines of young womanhood; the poise and grace of as fine a specimen of young womanhood, indeed, as any land might well produce. He knew at the first glance that here was a young lady. She was with this party but not of it. Her first words affirmed his first conviction.

"But why are you here?" he repeated in wonderment. "You don't belong here. This is a man's job. Didn't you know the risk you'd run?"

"None of us knew very much about it, sir," rejoined Taisie Lockhart. "We are beginning now to see."

She spread out her hands, indicating the absence of her herd.

"Sit down here by me, please, young lady." Hat in hand, he made a place for her. "Which one of these men did you say was your husband?"

The bright blood flooded Taisie's cheeks. Her trail boss answered for her.

"She won't be married none till we get to Aberlene," said Jim explicitly. "But that ain't nobody's fault but her own."

Sandy Griswold laughed uproariously.

"By jove!" said he. "It's an awful thing to be old

and lame and married—married before you were a day old, my dear. If I wasn't, I swear I'd marry you now, before you're a day older! What's the matter with all these young fellers?"

His keen blue eye under its shaggy brows swept the company of the Del Sol men, but found no mate for her. His eye lingered for just a time on a tall young man who stood quite apart.

"Come now," he resumed, turning to the girl from whose fresh beauty—which was beauty even in daylight, and even in the morning—his eyes did not willingly wander long, "tell me all about things. You don't belong in here, but of course I have got to help you out. I wouldn't fret too much. If I had not come along old Yellow Hand here would have put you on your uppers. As it is, we'll put him on his. We'll all go back down the trail together with my bullies yonder. We'll hold a big rodeo down there and see what the buffalo and the Comanches have left for you. Very foolish of you, my dear; very foolish, indeed. But we'll see what can be done."

"How could we ever pay you?" said Taisie Lockhart, turning upon him fully now the gaze of her disconcerting eyes.

"You've more than paid me now, my dear girl," said the old warrior. "Lockhart, you said your name was? What was your father's name?"

"His name was Burleson Lockhart, sir. He was colonel of the Ninth Volunteers in the war. We came from Alabama, once. But my father did not believe in the secession, though he fought with Texas."

"Why, I knew him! His regiment and mine were

opposed, in Tennessee!" His voice dropped. "But the men said you were an orphan. Your father did not get back from the war?"

Sudden memory caused her to drop her face in her hands. Once more her foreman spoke for her.

"Her pap was killed on the Missouri border, after the war, by the Federal bushwackers up there. He was driving cows up thataway. Them Yankee people in Austin have done robbed this girl of everything she had. We was driving these cows to see if we couldn't make a little stake for her oncet more."

Sandy Griswold sat silent for a time. At last he spoke quietly to the tall girl who sat on a bed roll beside him.

"Well, now!" he said. "Well now, we'll see what can be done. You don't belong here, but I'd be no sort of a soldier if I didn't see you through."

Now, as though by providential plan, had arrived unity of purpose and cheerfulness of spirit, an hour earlier unpredictable. Colonel Sandy Griswold was no man to delay action. In a half hour the camp was broken, and the entire party, preceded by the troopers, was retracing the way south to the scene of yesterday's disaster. The commanding officer rode by Taisie Lockhart's cart. The ferret eyes of the sullen Comanche saw now what had been hidden in the *carreta.* Between the cavalry commander and these wild savages there existed a distinct understanding of some sort, resting on fear of the troopers' carbines.

"I'm going to put the whole band to work for you," said Griswold, and called his interpreter.

The Del Sol men found themselves before long

enriched by the recruitment of a couple of dozen laughing young Indian braves—all of them unarmed—who for the mere excitement of the thing were ready to assist in the rounding up of the scattered cattle and horses. A strangely mixed round-up band they made, half of them grim and silent, the other half wildly whooping, when they started off down the trail which lay written on the grassy soil.

As all of them knew, a buffalo stampede was the worst possible run on the range. But fortune partially favored the harassed drovers. It soon was evident that the buffalo had avoided the fringe of timber which lay ahead, had kept on running into the wind, as was their custom—alone of all cud chewing game. The domestic cattle had plunged into the thickets and split up in the edge of shallow timbered draws, and the wind meant less to them. This partially combed out the cattle from the buffalo. Inside of three miles the riders began to pick up groups and strings of the cattle in the long dragnet which they swept through one cover after another.

"By golly!" exclaimed Jim Nabours suddenly, after they had ridden an hour or two. "I'll bet a thousand dollars there's old Alamo! If he's there, there'll be more!"

It was true. A gaunt yellow head crowned with wide horns stared at them over the thicket tops. Old Alamo, self-appointed leader of the herd, had concluded he had gone far enough—indeed, he was willing to fight to establish that fact now. But the sweep of the riders driving in the groups of cattle induced him to change his mind.

There never were better riders than the Comanches, and they were hunters as well. The round-up was sport for them. The wild band helped the trail boss to pick up one string after another of the scattered herd, horses mingled with them. One body after another of the gathering Nabours turned back to the old encampment where the run had begun. Especially, he set the Indians to rounding up the horse band, a task in which they took the most extreme delight. The joined forces combed out the entire country to the southeast for perhaps more than ten or fifteen miles by evening. All day long, under this or that party of riders, the stream of reclaimed cattle and horses continued, until even Jim Nabours ceased to grumble at the product of the day.

That night and yet another night Griswold held his camp, which included that of the drovers, some two miles apart from the Comanche village; but his subalterns day and night had out troops who held the Comanches under control. There was no outbreak. The fearless Comanches, feasting full, laughed and chattered like children. When Nabours reported to Griswold that he was content to end the rodeo, the tally showed that the Del Sol herd, cut down as it had been by the unprecedented losses, still numbered three thousand and ninety-six head of cattle; and sixty good riding horses remained in the remuda. They were pioneers. The term "per cent of loss" was then unknown on the trail. Later, such losses would have meant ruin.

"What cows is left," said Nabours, "I'll leave for to stock the Chickasaw range. As for the lost horses, I

reckon these here Comanches will take care of that after we are gone. To-morrow I'd like to start on north. We ain't got anything too much to eat but beef, and we mustn't waste no time."

"All right," said Griswold. "We'll all pull north together in the morning. My supply wagons are up and I'll trade you flour and bacon and dried apples for fresh beef. I'm tired of buffalo. I'll see you, anyhow, as far as the Washita crossing.

"I'm going to take Yellow Hand along with me," he added. "All these Comanches have got plenty of meat now, and they'll stand hitched until he comes back. I have told them that if they start any funny business I'm going to shoot Yellow Hand in front of the whole village.

"Send that man over to my tent," he said to Nabours. He pointed to McMasters, whose work he had seen. "I want to talk to him, since I know who he is. If he is a Texas sheriff and a captain of Texas Rangers he and I have got to have a little conversation about Comanches."

They two sat late that night in front of Griswold's tent, talking by the little fire. When they parted the soldier gave the young Ranger a strong clasp of the hand. What they had said no one but themselves knew.

And now, when the pink dawn of the prairie again came above the dewy grasses, there might be seen once more the sea of wide horns, in the old comfortable morning picture of the trail; the trail of days now gone by forever.

CHAPTER XXIX

A MAID'S MISTAKE

DIMINISHED but undaunted, the great herd swept north once more into the wide, sweet, unknown world. The mingled grasslands and narrow timber tracts which lay between the heads of the water courses made for cattle drovers a land of plenty where man had not yet come. In every hollow the wild deer sprang away, the head of every draw contained its flocks of great wild turkeys. On the grassy flats were uncounted coveys of the prairie grouse. The air was enlivened with the wild calls of the giant sickle-billed curfew; and from above came the mysterious, baffling liquid tremolo of the upland plover, honey sweet to hear. Glossy green parakeets showed in the timber mottes, meadow larks made gay the air with their metallic clankings, mixed with the broken strains of melody all their own. There was life, motion, all the time in the wild landscape.

The vegetable world also was rich, richer than our Government had thought when in ignorance it gave this domain to the savages in a treaty which, like all our treaties, later was to be repealed. Fruits began to appear, few of them yet ripening; wild grapes, plums. They crossed one strip of sand dunes which ran through the grassy knolls, and found an astonishing growth of dwarfed grapevines, showing not more

than a foot or so above the sand, but promising fruit of great size.

In the timbered valleys there was an admirable growth of elms, cottonwoods, black walnuts. Haws and persimmons, not yet ripe, young acorns of the oak trees, showed what the fall mast would be. The black bears and the deer even now were hunting mushrooms. Abundance of food was there for every species. The spotted wildcat made no unusual sight. Now and then a panther passed ghostlike from one covert to the next. A rich land and a contented, indolent, assured. The white men had not yet come. Nor was there even here either weed or bee.

Though really near the eastern edge of their range of that day, distant bands of the buffalo still showed; and adding yet keener zest to an enlivened landscape, frequent bands of wild horses passed in their easy drifting over the grasslands, or stood at gaze in superb confidence in their own speed. It was the open country, the free country, of the old West. In it these men were as much adventurers as had been the sailors of Columbus or Cabot, Leif Ericson or Magellan. It had taken three Army expeditions and a half century of time to find the head of the Red River, which made the drovers' Rubicon. Young in the youth of their world, they exulted as they rode.

Colonel Sandy Griswold quit the saddle for the jolting cart seat to which Nabours had banished Taisie Lockhart. The wilderness makes swift friendships.

"My dear," said the soldier to the girl one day as they rode, joltingly along. "I wouldn't ask anything better than just to ride along this way with you for-

ever. You are by no means painful to the naked eye, and within sixty days you will be rich. Abilene is not a dream, although it is just beginning. Two railroads are going west across the lower Plains now. They are going to make a cattle market at Abilene and you are in on the ground floor. Rich? Are you going to support a husband? You could, you know."

"I think I'll buy myself some clothes the first thing I'll do," said Taisie, slowly smiling, "if there is such a thing as women's clothes at Abilene."

"There you go! Woman's first instinct. Tell me" —suddenly—"where is that tall young man—you know which one I mean. You don't know where he is?"

"I think he's back behind to-day. He's not regularly on the herd—now."

"You don't know very much, do you, my dear? You'd let a brave, square man ride on the drag?"

"Please don't, I beg of you! I don't really know why you mention him. My men all are splendid."

But he went on relentlessly.

"Yes; and I suppose you know that your men are riding his horses—that you are eating his food yourself? Did you know that he staked you for this drive—that he is going to make your fortune for you? No, you never knew that. But that's true."

"Oh, don't tell me such things!" broke out Taisie in swift consternation. "I never knew that! Of course I never knew it! I'd never have gone a foot! Oh, this is an awful thing!"

"Yes, my dear; there are awful things that a woman can do to a man, too. Now that it is too late it would be quite like a woman for you to love him. You ought

to have trusted him in the first place. You can't fool with a man like that. He's cold iron."

"He didn't—he wouldn't—don't you think—do you suppose—why, what can I do? I've been unjust. Yes, I know that now!"

"Well, I wouldn't climb down out of this cart right now anyhow," said Colonel Griswold calmly.

"But I can't go on this way. What shall I do? Rich? No, I'm a pauper! And I've not a soul in all the world to go to."

"Oh, yes, you have, my dear! Observe me beat on my chest. I, Sandy Griswold, will save this maiden in distress! But it's always best to get the truth, the first thing. Well, you've got it now. You never would have learned it unless I had told you. That young man would rather cut his throat than tell you what I have told you. He never dreamed I would. But I thought it right."

"But I can't go on this way!"

"You have got to go on in this way, my dear. There is nothing else for you to do. When that man says he is through he is through. He's got the chief ingredients of a bad man. But there never was a bad man who didn't have good things about him. That sort of a man can't alter a decision. He thinks once, acts once, is done once and for all, and when he's done he's done. I can't help you with him. But what a splendid pair of human beings you have spoiled!"

"A fine prospect you give me, sir! Oh, you are comforting!" said Taisie Lockhart bitterly.

"It will be very hard for a girl like you not to marry some man. It is a very terrible thing to marry the

wrong man, my dear. It's a very terrible thing to let a man think you meant to marry him when you didn't. It's the worst when a man wants to marry and can't—because he can't forgive an insult to his honor. It is lucky you are not a man."

"Ah, less lucky that I am woman! I shall choke at the thought of eating his bread!"

"Oh, no, you won't. That's melodrama, my dear. If you don't like his flour eat some of mine.

"No, keep your eyes closed and your mouth closed, too, until you get to Abilene. I may meet you or send for you up there myself. That's what the Army's for—we're organized to help damsels in distress. That you are in distress I know very well indeed. While there's a sack of flour or an ambulance mule left—well, we'll see."

At the encampment of the last night below the Washita, Taisie Lockhart might well have felt a sense of security. There were two troops of cavalry and all her own men bivouacked about her. But she could not sleep.

Soon after dark that night Dan McMasters, asking no consent and giving no notification, quietly rose and caught up his night horse. He disappeared in the darkness headed toward the ford. He said no word of good-by to any one, and was not missed by any one—save by one unhappy girl who had lacked his coming all these days. She was sure she hated him—when she reasoned. When she did not reason she felt her veins run hot with love of him. He had kissed her. Their arms had encircled one another. Ah, obligations?

CHAPTER XXX

MANY TRANSACTIONS

THE cattle, full fed and well-watered, had bedded down in their compact oblong, willing to rest after two days' hard march. Nabours had doubled the night guard. The men in pairs rode in reverse around and around the herd, passed and repassed slowly, regularly, singing the cradle song of the cows.

Nabours, worn by long hours, early pulled his blankets over his face. Cinquo Centavos himself dozed under his ragged quilt, in his dreams comforted with the subconscious tinkling of the gray mare's bell. In the cavalry camp, a half mile away, all was quiet save for the methodical tramp of the sentinels.

Midnight. Jim Nabours felt a strong hand laid on his shoulder.

"Hush!" whispered a voice. "It's McMasters."

"What's wrong?" demanded the foreman, flying off his blanket.

"Rudabaugh's gang will jump us in less than half an hour. Get all the men up. I am going to tell the soldiers."

The loud challenge of a sentinel halted him, but soon he was admitted in the cavalry camp. Griswold was

up at once. McMasters put before him a hurried report.

"They're ahead about four or five miles," he explained; "camped on the Washita. One of their hunters saw us to-day. He had just got in when I made the edge of their camp. I was close enough to their camp to hear them talking. But I don't think he knew the soldiers were here. He must just have seen some of our cattle. Of course they know what herd it is. There are about twenty of them. They're going to try to surprise us. You'll help us surprise them, won't you?"

Griswold rubbed his chin.

"Well, I don't know that the U. S. Army has any special cause to act as a police posse in a family row; but I suppose I'll have to throw in with you. Fine place for a woman, isn't it?"

He had no reply to that. But a few moments later Taisie Lockhart heard steps approaching her cart. She put out her head to answer Nabours' hurried call; saw McMasters and Griswold also standing close. Nabours announced the plan already made by these three.

"There's danger, Miss Taisie. The Rudabaugh gang is coming. They'll come right to your cart the first thing, like enough. Hand us out that chest. We're going to hide it under the beds by the fire. Come on with us. The men are all up now. Crawl into any bed you see and get all the blankets and saddles around you that you can. You'll be safer there than here. They want what's in that box."

An instant later, fastening her jacket, she ran, but turned back. McMasters was not coming.

"But you," she began—"where are you going?"

"I am going back to get in your cart," said he. "That will probably be where they'll head in."

Apparently he did not hear her speak again.

Under Griswold's military orders now, two long curving lines of soldiers and trail men were spread out, leaving a wide opening at the end where the attack was to be expected. The orders were that each man was to lie flat in the grass and not to fire until the invaders were well inside the lines.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed, a half hour. The herd still slept well. The riders, duly warned, kept up their crooning. The embers of the fire smoldered.

Suddenly the strain of vigilance was broken. The night air was rent by the shrill yell of the Comanche war whoop!

It was no war cry of the attacking party. It was only the devilish fashion that old Yellow Hand, close guarded, had chosen to appraise approaching invaders of his own presence and of his defiance of the men who held him captive. Whatever he expected to gain by his bravado, the wily old Iago got quick results in a swinging blow at the side of his head from a cavalry carbine which laid him out for the rest of the fight.

The fight, of course, was on at once; the keen ears of the savage had detected the presence of the enemy between the two lines of guards. The night went alight in slanting streaks of rifle fire. There was general mêlée. The Del Sol men and the troopers could make

out little, except that their enemy was between the jaws of the trap that had been set for them.

One man of the assailants, unsuspected, had crawled close to the cart where Taisie Lockhart had slept. When the yell of the reckless savage broke the air—followed by the general rattle of musketry—there came the roar of the startled herd once more stampeding in the night. No cattle could stand under this. In this increase of the confusion the crawling invader arose and made a rush toward the cart. There came two red flashes from the front flap. The man fell forward and lay motionless. For a second time Rudabaugh had failed to get his coveted title to uncounted Texas acres. At the same hands, another of his boldest men had fallen.

From the rear of the cook cart came the roar of a Sharpe Berdan. Cinquo had gone into action.

"I got him! I got one!"

The boy began to crawl out from under the cart, hastening to where he saw something lying in the grass. He had lain close to the spot where the mistress of Del Sol lay bundled up in blankets; and he had thrown around her a barricade of every saddle he could find, combined with every roll of blankets.

A bugle sounded, the signal for the two lines to close in. When they heard the rush of many feet on both sides of them Rudabaugh and his men knew that they were trapped by vastly superior numbers. Not many of them were left standing. Of these, all now sought quarter. There came cries of, "Don't shoot! We surrender!" But the Del Sol men, fearing treachery, were merciless. When they had crowded to-

gether the remainder of the bandits the trail men rushed upon them with pistol butts and quirts and rifle barrels. The few left alive were roped and bound.

Of the score of assailants only two remained alive and uncaptured—Rudabaugh and the crafty man known as Baldy. Crouching low, they got off in the grass at the best speed they could muster, and until tally was made at the camp fire no one missed them. Not until daylight, indeed, could the full list of fatalities be determined. For the defenders there was but one casualty—Al Pendleton, who had got a shot through the leg and was disabled for the time.

What had been a trail camp was now anything but that. The men gathered their prisoners closer to the fire, built it up. A trooper dragged up Yellow Hand, barely conscious, sullen and silent.

"Here is your friend, gentlemen," said Griswold grimly to the surviving men of the attacking party. "He did all he could for you. I ought to blow his brains out, and yours out, too, and I've a damned good mind to do it."

He turned toward Dan McMasters, who had come to the fireside.

"Now about these men," he said, "I am going to take them out with me on a charge of killing those Indian women down near the Arbuckles. They're accessories anyway. I've got no jurisdiction and no warrant, and it isn't my business; but what's the Army for? Now about this old thief, I'm going to ask him a few questions."

He jerked Yellow Hand roughly to his feet.

"Come here, Danny," he called out to his interpreter. "Tell this old liar I want to ask him some questions."

"Says he don't want to talk," began the interpreter, as the savage grunted a few sullen syllables.

"Tell him he's got to talk. Ask him this: Ask him, suppose white man come into camp and shoot two women, what does Comanche warrior do?"

"Says Comanche warrior catch white man some day."

"Tell him the chief of these people that came into our camp ran away like a coyote in the grass. Tell him that man, last week, he shoot two Comanche women, just to see them kick. Yellow Hand tried to be the friend to-night of the man who shoots Comanche women. Yellow Hand acts not like a chief but like a foolish person."

Rapid and excited conversation for some time between the interpreter and the warrior.

"Says Yellow Hand and his men shot a few buffalo. The Kiowas said all right. Says he's good Indian. Says white man tie him up and knock him in the head. Says holler just now in the dark because he feel good. Says he don't know who come. Says if it's all right for white man to try Comanche, then all right for Comanche to try white man. Says suppose if that man killed two Comanche women, then white man catch him for Comanche. Then Comanche try him plenty."

"How! How!" exclaimed Griswold. "Then they'd be willing to forget that I asked Yellow Hand to ride with me a while?" Griswold's face was animated. He was working out some plan.

The interpreter replied, after translating some Comanche and Spanish mixed:

"Says, yes, sure. Comanches like this country. Comanches no want to fight. Says his young men will have bad hearts if they find two of their women killed. Says s'pose warrior gets killed—all right. S'pose woman gets killed, that's plenty bad shame."

"Ask him what people this?"

Griswold suddenly held up before Yellow Hand's face the two moccasins which McMasters had brought with him from the Arbuckle Trail.

The old savage looked once, twice, closely. His face underwent an astonishing change—was convulsed with surprise, grief, anger. He gave but one ejaculation and drew his blanket across his face.

"Says his people! Says his family—his squaws! He know them shoe!"

"Yellow Hand! Yellow Hand!" The officer shook the old chief roughly by the shoulder. "Listen to me! Chief of the Comanches, this is our council now! Me, I talk!" The soldier stripped back the blanket from the Comanche's face.

"Yellow Hand, for years we have been trying to get you to stop killing our people on the Staked Plains. The Great Father has always fought you fair. The Great Father never killed your women. The Great Father will put his blanket over his face when he hears of this thing.

"Listen Yellow Hand! Chiefs do not break their word. If we follow the man who did that—that man who ran away—and bring him to you and give him

A Paramount Picture.

IN THE MIDST OF THE RIVER CROSSING.

North of 36.

ace

to your people to try him in your village will you think that the Great Father is just in his heart?"

"Says yes, he would." The interpreter had made it plain.

"Listen, Yellow Hand! I have been trying to make treaty with you. I have been trying to get a great piece of land here where the game is plenty for the Comanches and the Kiowas, a place where they could sit down. You have not answered me about that. I have followed you. I have fed you. I have not killed your women.

"Listen, Yellow Hand! The white men are going west into your hunting country. The white men are coming north here. You see them. My young men with long knives are coming out too. They will surround you, as many as leaves on the trees. You can never kill them all. They have guns that shoot seven days.

"Listen, Yellow Hand! When the buffalo are gone you will be hungry. I gave you a great piece of land. I asked you to sit down. I gave you a treaty. I make no war now on the Comanches or the Kiowas. I will give you a good place, many miles, down by the mountains of the Wichitas, where there is much game.

"Listen, Yellow Hand! Tell him to answer me, Danny! If I do all this for you, and if I bring that man back who killed your women, will the Comanches come in and sit down by the side of the Kiowas in this country where all around them are the men of the other tribes, who have taken treaty with the Great Father? Tell him to answer, damn him, Danny!"

Yellow Hand himself sprang to his feet, cast off his blanket and stood now the Indian warrior and orator. Chief of a people, he spoke to an audience who understood him not, an audience who sat about him in the dark; but the fire of his words showed his conviction, made him understandable.

"Says he is ready to be killed. Says he tells the truth. Says his heart is sad because his women have been killed. Says if you will bring him in the man that did that, then he will be good Indian. Says he will make treaty. Says he will sit down by the side of his friends, the Kiowas. Says he will do nothing now without asking the Great Father. Says he has nothing more to say."

"How! How!" exclaimed the officer.

He reached out and took the hand of the Comanche in his own. Then he turned toward McMasters.

"Dead or alive, we've got to have that man Rudabaugh. Do you know what that means? The man who can do that will be of more use to Texas than almost any man Texas ever produced. That means the end of the Comanche war. That means the Comanches will take a reservation in the Nations. Even Indians have some idea of actual justice. Dead or alive, I want Rudabaugh!"

"Take him away, men." He nodded to his top sergeant. "Feed this man well. Give him coffee, give him sugar, give him anything we've got. Build up the fire. This is one good night's work!"

He continued his talk to McMasters, pacing up and down in his excitement.

"If we could make peace for Texas, if we could

clear the western border for settlement—why, we'd be preparing a cattle trail clear across the Staked Plains! Other herds? You can be sure more are going to follow yours, farther west, as soon as the road is clear. I'd rather fight Indians than feed them any day, but if I've got to do both I am going to do them both on the square.

"Now I want Rudabaugh. When we've brought him in we have done more for the cowmen of Texas than all the railroads and all the United States Government ever yet have done. Little things sometimes run into big ones; good may come out of an evil deed. I want to see that low-down brute who killed those women. The sight of his face is a thing right dear to me.

"Yellow Hand," he said, once more addressing the Comanche, "your hands are no longer tied. In the morning go back to your people. You shall ride alone if you wish. Tell your people that I am going back to my own village at the Wichita hills and sit down. Tell them I will not follow the Comanches this summer. Tell them that my young men are following the men who killed the women of the Comanches. All these men are going on the war trail. They will not rest until they bring back that man." And thus spoke Danny to the chief.

"Well, sunny days and starry nights to you, my dear!"

The old soldier turned to Anastasie Lockhart. Her troubled eyes looked into his an instant. He would not listen to her stammering attempt at thanks.

A bugle sounded. The troops took formation, rode away, jaunty guidon at the head; a waif of silk in

buckskin land, themselves waifs of fortune, doing their duty unseen on the far frontier, with thanks of no one and criticism from all. They were men of the Army which had saved a country and now was finding one—our Army—never understood; one day, to-day, our day, ignorantly to be despised.

"It looks like you was riding, too," commented Nabours. He nodded to the saddled horse of McMasters, the additional horse with light pack, whose lariat was thrown over the saddle horn.

"Yes," said McMasters in his cold and noncommittal way.

"I wish you didn't have to go. The men don't want to see you go. It's only kind of hard for them to say so. But afore you do ride north—and I reckon I know why you do—I wisht you'd sort of give me some idee of the country ahead. You've heard or seen more of it than I ever have."

McMasters took a stick and began to make a map in the smoothed ashes of the camp fire.

"I'd like to help you over the Washita," he said: "but you won't find that a very bad crossing—steep banks, and swift, but narrow. You'd better make some sort of raft and get the carts across.

"The next big river is the main Canadian, not so far above here. It'll be dry, always very little water in it. It's bone-dry sometimes for a hundred miles.

"The North Fork of the Canadian—it runs here—is the crookedest river out of doors. It carries more water than the big river. You will probably have to swim some there, but you ought to make it all right.

"You'll get through the blackjack country, and then you'll come up to the Cimarron-easy fording. Just beyond that you'll be somewhere close to latitude thirty-six. You might then almost say you are getting out of the South and into the North.

"My father and old Colonel Lockhart always used to talk to me about wintering all their cattle just under that line. They said that would make them free of sticks for the next season. Some longhorns took fever even as far north as Illinois. It didn't make Texas popular.

"Now, when you get north of 36—here's where it runs—you have only got the Salt Fork of the Arkansas between you and the main Arkansas. It comes out of Kansas not so very far from where you'll hit the Kansas line."

"It sounds right far," said Jim Nabours.

"Yes: when you get up in there you're coming into the edge of a thousand miles of open range, the best cattle ground out of doors; and there isn't a cow in it from one end to the other. That country's waiting for cows. It needs them as much as our cows need a market.

"Well, you'll find out all these things as you come to them."

Always scant of speech, he turned away, swung into the saddle. Reaching down he held out a hand to Cinquo, the boy herder, who had followed him.

"We done saved her, Mister Sher'f," said the boy.

But Dan McMasters did not cast a glance back of him to the white-topped cart which made the only home of Taisie Lockhart.

"Now," said Jim Nabours, turning to his own horse, "everybody can start like he pleases except us. Afore I need a map I need some cows. Come on, men, we got to foller out one more run. Lucky if we get seven and a half cows to Aberlene."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE JONAH

"MOVE 'em out, boys! We'll see what'll happen next." Nabours spoke with a half sigh in his voice. The departure of McMasters and of the soldiers had left a strange feeling of loneliness among the Del Sol men. They began to brood, to lose morale. This was after two more days of riding, combing cattle out of the timber along the Washita, which very luckily had caught and left partly nugatory the last run of the much harassed herd.

The hour was not yet late; and although the tired trail hands had little enough of sleep, there was no active murmuring, and the order of the day once more began, the long line of longhorns stringing out, the guides on either side.

The cattle paced on methodically enough, but the arrival at the Washita was so late in the day that the trail boss concluded not to cross until the following morning. They found the banks as McMasters had said—high and steep; and the river had swimming water. But much to their joy they found a good-sized raft which some one, probably Rudabaugh and his men, for reasons of their own, had spent some time and care in building.

"Well, there won't many of them need it now," commented Nabours, "and we do. That's the first luck we've had. I'm scared to swim that girl again."

They crossed the carts without difficulty in the morning, and the entire herd swam over easily, a narrow trail being plain on the other side.

Once more on their way, and with the Washita behind them, a certain feeling of light-heartedness came to the trail drovers. They sang cheerily to their cows as they rode alongside, caught the feel of the new country lying on ahead.

The weather was not unfavorable, but in the afternoon the older trail men began to look at the sky. There was a dull, lifeless feeling in the air. The wind had ceased. A bank of clouds lay black in the lower west.

"It may rain," said Jim Nabours, coming over to Taisie's near-by camp after the herd was turned off to bed down. "You and your women, Miss Taisie, had better sleep in the carts to-night. I hope to the Lord our little dogies won't take a notion to run again to-night! This herd's getting plumb spoiled. Before long they'll run every time a feller lights a cigarrito."

"Look as that lightning in west, Jim," remarked Cal Dalhart. "It's worse than cigarritos. I hope she'll pass around."

But the prairie storm did not intend to pass around them. They lay directly in the center of a low barometer. The air was oppressively hot, so still that a leaf would have fallen straight to the ground; yet the face of the western cloud was lit with continuous elec-

trical discharges. An uneasiness came into the air that even the cattle felt. The greenhead flies had swarmed in the grass all day. Now clouds of mosquitoes made life a burden for men and beasts. It was hard to bed the cattle down.

"Set the wagon tongues on the North Star, boys, while you can see it," said Jim Nabours. The dark cloud was steadily rising. "This is going to be one hell of a night. You'll need your slickers. Look yonder! I've heard tell about that sort of a thing, but I've never saw it afore."

He pointed toward the bed ground. In the strange electrical condition of the air the horns of each steer showed two little balls of flame, thousands of them in the total, a strange and awesome sight in the gloom. As the night watch rode later they saw electricity on the tips of their horses' ears. It almost dripped from the air; the earth seemed bathed in it.

At midnight the stars passed away under a high vanguard of scurrying clouds. The strange tensity in the air increased as continuous rolls of thunder came closer.

"We've all got to get on the herd," said Nabours finally. "There's going to be trouble."

The men all mounted their night horses and made ready. There came to them all a feeling of pygmylike incompetency as the edge of the storm extended itself as though with some inner propelling power. The wind had not yet begun. They knew they were in for one of the terrible electrical storms of the prairies.

The steady flashes of lightning along the cloud face broke into jagged forks. Intermittent among these

came short bolts of the chain lightning. A smell of sulphur filled the air. A strange blue tint seemed to come into some of the lightning bolts. At times there seemed to be a continuous sheet of fire along the grass tops towards the west. This later was broken by balls of fire which rolled along the ground, exploding like bombshells. There seemed nothing in the air except light; sparks and whirls and wheels of light, like so many pin wheels. A strange, alarming, oppressive feel, as though of a settling fog, came upon them all. If a man reached a hand to his hat brim the electricity literally dripped from it.

Rarely, even on the high prairies, did the tremendous electrical disturbances ever reach such violence; not one of these hardened range men had ever seen the like of this. But to the wonder of all the cattle did not at once make any break. They seemed stupefied themselves. They now all were on their feet, but in the continuous succession of blinding flashes on every side, the crash of thunder coming from all quarters, they could form no course for running and stood rooted in sheer terror. Nor was there a man who did not think his own end had come.

The climax came in a straight bolt from above, which struck and exploded directly in the middle of the herd. The detonation was as though a giant shrapnel shell had dropped. Twenty cattle were killed outright. Two horses dropped. A rider was smitten dead, another came out of the shock dazed and for some hours stone deaf. The old Mexican, Sanchez, had a fashion of wearing a pair of ancient spectacles. They were burned from his ears, only the bow between the

rims remaining, and that burned deep into his nose. Len Hersey boasted a fancy tie with a stickpin, once bought in better days. The gold was melted from it, the stone dropped in the grass. The nap of his sombrero was singed smooth. A score of unbelievable phenomena, a series of miraculous escapes came all at once.

This last exploding bolt, so disastrous in its effect, was more than any herd could stand. The cattle started like a covey of quail. The universe seemed in dissolution. There was nothing for the men to do but follow as best they could. It was as safe in one place as in another, and of shelter there was none. Never was a wilder ride than that night; for now, with a rush and steady roar, came the wind and the slanting rain. The encampment at the bed ground was afloat, deserted. Old Milly put out her head.

"Miss Taisie! Miss Taisie!" she called. She got no answer. "My Lord! she done killed!" she called out to Anita.

Then arose her lamentations continuously as she lay in her drenched blankets. They two were all that remained. Even Buck was gone.

The run in a general way had headed north. A couple of miles ahead, between them and the Canadian River, lay a little boggy creek lined with thickets. Suddenly enlarged by the rain, it overflowed and made very soft footing for fifty or a hundred yards. Into this boggy trap the animals plunged in their madness. Within a few moments a third of the herd was bogged down. An inexplicable confusion took place among the others. No man could do anything here. The riders

only followed such strings of cattle as they could hear farther down the stream. They all knew that when daylight came they would have their work to do in salvaging from the quagmire. Most of them tried to find their way back to camp, and those who made it sat huddled, drenched, as the weird flame-edged clouds passed on. Until dawn, they never knew there was a dead man lying in the grass on the bed ground three hundred yards from the camp, among the dead cattle and horses. Well, it was another grave; and this made the first duty of the day. They put up the third little headboard. So passed Al Pendleton. Though crippled by his gunshot wound, he had insisted on taking saddle.

Now the work of snaking out bogged cattle—the most unwelcome of all range work—must go forward along the muddy stream, hour after hour, as soon as the depressing dawn gave light for the beginning. The waters falling, some of the cattle struggled ashore as soon as they could see. Others needed but little help, a few had to be abandoned. In this work of roping and dragging, it took two men to handle a steer. As soon as one of the wild creatures got his feet he was certain to charge his rescuer. Hard work, dirty work, dangerous work; slow, utterly disheartening. But it was here to be done. Once more, slowly, a battered and begrimed cohort of broad horns began to assemble, watched by tired, muddy, cursing men.

"Sinker," called Nabours to the boy as he came by coiling his muddy rope in the gray cold dawn, "you go on and find Dalhart, and ride back to camp. I don't know where the rest of the horses went. Drive in

what cows you find. It ain't so far. Tell the cook we'll be in for a little coffee, some of us, right soon."

These two, so commanded, came into camp only to learn the news from Milly. The bed of Taisie Lockhard was empty. Her horse was gone.

"I'll bet I know!" said Cinquo. "I'll bet she follered the remuda in the dark!"

He was off, following the plain trail of the running horses, Dalhart at his side. They rode hard for a mile. The horses had struck timber, slowed up and scattered.

"I see her!" called out the boy at last. "That's her zebry horse anyway."

The white-banded son of Blancocito was not to be mistaken. But the saddle was empty! At the foot of a near-by tree lay the object which they sought.

She was alive, was sitting up, propped against a tree trunk; indeed, was on the point of mounting. So much they saw with sudden joy as they flung down and ran to her.

The man pushed the boy away roughly. Kneeling, Dalhart caught the girl in his arms, uttering impetuous words. What he saw filled Cinquo with shame and horror. This man had touched the divinity of Del Sol! He was holding her in his arms! He was going to kiss her! Sacrilege!

Cinquo saw flame points. He sprang forward, his long revolver in his hand.

"Say, you! You let go of her, mister! Stop now, or I'll stop you for shore!"

The boy was blubbering in his excitement, but as Dalhart turned he saw that the aim of the weapon

was true. Taisie beat at him with her hands, weakly, pushing him away.

"I'll wring your neck!" began Dalhart, starting toward the boy. Only the girl's voice saved them one or both

"No! No!" she called. "He means well! Cinquo, come here!"

Dalhart turned to her almost savagely.

"You promised me!" he said. "You gave me your word down there! Is this how you keep your promise?"

But between the two of them, the girl with her tears and the boy with his revolver, Cal Dalhart got on very ill with his wooing.

"I can wait," said he slowly at last.

In his sobbing excitement the boy was dangerous as a rattlesnake, and Dalhart was wise enough to know it. Only one voice could calm him. Taisie spoke with decision.

"Throw down you gun, Cinquo! Drop it, I tell you!"

Cinquo obeyed. His tears came freely now. He trembled.

"Trouble with me is, ma'am," said he, "I got chills and fever. To-day I got 'em both. I been up all night. I don't give a damn for that man, but this here is awful hard for you."

"Cinquo," said Taisie, putting her hand on his grimy shirt sleeve as she drew him beside her, "you are as good a man as I've got. Listen now! I'm not hurt. I just ran into a tree in the dark and got knocked out of the saddle. For a long time I didn't know anything—my head's bruised; but I was going to get

up and ride right soon. Now go and find the horses; they're not far. I saw the bell mare just below."

The boy, shivering in his saddle, racked by the native ague, went off dully about his duties. He cast an eye over his shoulder, saw Dalhart riding close to the side of the mistress of Del Sol.

"The trouble with you is," broke out Dalhart moodily, "you don't know how a man can love you—you don't know how I love you!"

He reached out a hand to touch the bridle of her saddle horse, which flung its head impatiently.

"I think I do," said Taisie slowly. "You love me like a man. They're all alike."

"I believe you do love that damned Gonzales renegade. He's gone again, and he may come back, or he may not. What you need is a man to take care of you; some one better than that cold-blooded killer that ain't got a heart for either man or woman!"

"Stop! I tell you I want to hear no more of this!" The girl's voice had in it a quiet fury. "At least I never have heard that man say a word against you or any one else. If he's a killer he'd face his man, I'm sure of that, and not curse him behind his back."

"He'd better not say anything about me," Dalhart blustered.

But Taisie Lockhart's contemptuous laugh at that was the cruelest thing he had ever heard in all his life. She spurred on and left him.

Dribbles of the herd continued to come in. The draggled encampment was slow to take on even a little order. The men had begun to lose confidence, to

dread their luck. And now was time for a repetition of the scene on the south bank of the Red—another rider must find burial in his blankets. Never had the spirits of the men been so low, the hope of success so faint, the savage irritability of all so unmistakable.

It took a day and a half to finish the unhappy duties of the last camp below the Canadian and drive forward the remade herd. It was necessary to follow down the boggy stream to find a sound crossing. Beyond, within a mile or so, lay the main Canadian. Here at least they met no trouble. The spongelike sands had swallowed up the torrents until only an occasional thread of lazily trickling water marked the wide expanse from bank to bank. The cattle, warm and thirsty, seemed disposed to break ranks and explore these little trickles of water, so that the men had enough to do. Dalhart rode moodily, indifferently, on his point.

"Damn it, man!" called Del Williams to him, approaching him after one more chase after a wisp of stragglers. "I'd think you could 'tend to your own end part ways somehow!"

It was the first time he had spoken to Dalhart in days. Their enmity was smoldering.

"I don't need any help from anybody about handling cows," retorted the other; "least of all from you."

Del Williams rode straight up to him at what seemed a challenge.

"I don't see you for no cowman, myself," said he.

They sat face to face midway of the dry river bed.

"I want to know what you mean," said Dalhart. "I've been as good a hand on this trail as you have."

"I don't think so. Nothing but luck kept you from drownding that girl crossing the Red. More than that, it was you that let logs come through the cattle when they was swimming the day before. That started the mill. Four hundred cows lost and two men drownded. You was upriver side of the herd."

This was mortal affront, as Del Williams was willing that it should be. At the time both men were unarmed.

"You know I won't stand that," said Dalhart.

"You heard it plain," rejoined Williams quietly. "Make your play any time you like."

"All right, I will make it! We both said we'd hold off till we struck Abilene. We'll not both ride south together," said Dalhart savagely.

"I hope not," smiled Del Williams. "I have got plenty of grief riding in sight of you going north."

Neither man liked to be the first to back his horse. Their actions caught the sight of Nabours, who started back.

"Look here!" he began. "What are you two doing here?"

"Well," began Dalhart, "he told me I wasn't doing my work."

"Then he told you plumb right. Look at you now, both of you. You two give me your word, both of you, that you'd quit this quarreling till you got to Abilene. Now quit it or else get out. If a little more happens I am going to get on the prod my own self."

They separated. Del Williams later approached Nabours, both moody, sore.

"Jim," said he, "look at the luck! Could anything more happen to us? I tell you, there's a Jonah somewheres on this herd."

"There shore is!" rejoined the harried foreman. "There shore is! And it's got red hair."

CHAPTER XXXII

LAZYING ALONG

UPON even the most seasoned outdoor men the weather has undeniable influence. Came now a bright sun and gentle winds. The prairie lay like a silver sea. The surliness of the men vanished, they were children again. Once more the force of custom, of duty, made itself felt.

One more camp brought them to the North Fork of the Canadian, a more serious proposition than had been the main river of that name. The channel was narrower and deeper, and the banks, especially upon the south side, much more steep. There was only a narrow channel of swimming water, but not a man in the outfit would have consented to see the mistress of Del Sol undertake to swim her own horse across even the narrowest channel. The entire herd was held up for half a day while the men make a rude raft sufficient to cross the carts and their occupants. They dug down the bank on the farther shore so that better egress might be offered for the cattle.

"By the time a cow has swum a river," said Jim Nabours to expostulating men, who did not like shovel work, since that, at least, could not be done on horseback, "he's plumb tired, like enough. Make him climb a steep bank and he may fall back in. The

worst place for them to get crowded is on the far side of a river. Now you fellows go on and dig a nice path, or else maybe we won't have no cows a-tall before long. I'm scared to make a tally, way it is."

So they passed yet another unknown river and swung on out, their own trail makers.

"I wish to God I knowed where we was," grumbled the trail boss to Len Hersey, carefree cowhand, to whom he happened to be talking. "Unless'n that wagon tongue has got warped we're still heading north. I done set her on the North Star last night my own self. But a trail scout had orto have a watch and a compass, and there ain't nary one of either in this whole outfit."

Hersey took a chew of tobacco.

"Heap o' things in life ain't needful," said he; "just only folks gets used to them, that's all. That lead steer Alamo's all right if nobody don't move the North Star. He's got his eye sot on that. I seen him standing up the other night about one o'clock, looking at that star with one eye. He done wink at me with the other one. He shore knows where we're at, Jim. You'd oughtn't to worry. This suits me, although I will say that this here shirt I got now might be a little better around the elbows. I hate to go to meeting in it."

"When I was a boy," said Nabours reminiscently, "the onliest kind of church we had was camp meeting. I ain't saw one of them for quite a while.

"Them big meetings used to bring in everybody from all over. The preacher'd throw the camp in some nice grove, and folks would build a shed with a brush roof and make some seats out of slabs. That was the

church. I've saw a bearskin used for a pulpit cover. If there was extra ministers on hand, sometimes they'd have rawhide-bottom chairs made for them. The mourner's bench, it always had a good rawhide bottom too. There used to be plenty straw scattered around between the benches for the sake of them that got conviction right strong and begun to throw fits. What with horses and dogs and babies, there was quite a settlement to a good camp meeting, while it lasted. The men didn't always have hats and the women couldn't always afford calico, but I can't see but what we got along all right.

"Them days a feller had to load a rifle at the front end exclusive—no Henry rifles then. It was perlite for to lean your shooting iron against a tree and hang your powder horn on it before you went in to get religion. My pap always taken a drink of corn licker a-fore he set in; but he always put down a gourdful of cold water on top of it, so it didn't hurt him none, he told me.

"I recollect when we built the first log school in the valley. It was about ten foot square. But come to style, the courthouse up to Sherman, twenty years ago, it made a ree-cord. I was there when that house was built. It was twenty foot square. That and a few furrows of plowed ground was all there was to the county seat. We dedicated her with a barbecue; a barbecue was the only thing Texas could afford then. Huh! It's the only thing she can afford now. We all sot under a brush shed and everybody felt right good. There was a barrel of whisky and a tin cup and a nigger with a fiddle. That's the way to start a county seat right.

"There wasn't a foot of railroad anywheres in them days. Yet in Texas we've got over a hunderd miles of railroad built already. The Lord knows what'll happen next.

"You talking about shirts, Len! Enduring of the war, three or four years ago, all my folks had to make their own shirts. The women folks had to weave and spin the woolsey. First thing I can remember was helping to braid hide and horse-hair ropes. Everybody tanned their own leather with oak bark. We made our own saddle trees out of forks and rawhide, and we covered them with our own leather—*lastro, rosaderos,* taps and all. We didn't have no wells; we drunk out'n the creeks. Some neighbor had to make all the shoes we got. We ground our corn meal in a hand mill and we made our own wagons and ox yokes. If we got a loom or spinning wheel we had to make that too. Folks used to make hats out of palmetto; they braided them theirselves. What we got done we had to do; there wasn't no one to hire nor nothing to pay them with.

"Shirt? Why a shirt, now, Len—a shirt in the old times used to last a feller for years. Has yores?"

"It shore has," replied Len Hersey, "She's been a plumb good one, too, and I'm sorry to see her go. My mammy made her for me, I don't know how long back, but quite some time. Trouble about shirts is, anyways boughten ones, it takes so much for spurs and boots and saddles a feller ain't got much left to buy a shirt. I wouldn't be no ways contented with one of them homemade saddles of yourn no more. It don't leave much for shirts atter you got a cow outfit paid fer.

"But as I was sayin', I'm happy just to drift along over this here country. Ain't she fine? This morning, along when the sun was shinin' so perty, you'd orter seen old Sanchez' fighting rooster! He natural flewed up on the cart and crowed to a fare ye well, he felt that good!"

"He'd 'a' been a lot better off if he'd 'a' sot on top the cart every night," commented Nabours. "Anita, old Sanchez' woman, she starts out with three roosters and eight hens, allowing, I reckon, to start a hen ranch somewhere up north in case we got busted and couldn't get home. She can't no ways start one now. The skunks and wildcats and coyotes has got 'em all excepting old Mister Gallina, and he shy part of one wing.

"Ain't that rooster like a fool Texan? He's lonesome and broke, and don't know where he's at, and part of his comb is tore, and he can't fly much; but, 'Praise God,' says he, 'I got both my spurs!' "

"Shore he does," nodded Len Hersey. "All the whole state o' Texas ever has owned has been a pair o' spurs.

"Funny how time changes," he went on, lolling on his saddle horn as he spoke. "When my pap moved into Ulvade County cows wasn't worth nothing. The only thing to do was to kill them for their hides, and if you got four bits for a hide that was big money. Lately people got a dollar apiece fer hides. I wouldn't be surprised ef we got two dollars a hide in Aberlene. We'll like enough have to sell 'em fer the hides. Ain't no money in cows.

"I was on a herd oncet that driv to Shreveport time

of the war. We got into cockleburs so heavy the cows' tails got like clubs. They'd hung up by the tails in the piney woods over in Louisiana. You could hear 'em bawl bloody murder. I don't know how many we left hanging in the piney woods. There wasn't no money in that drive and the cows got thin as rails. We couldn't even skin 'em."

"Huh!" commented the older man. "The longer you live the nearer you'll come to learning how many things can happen to folks that trails cows, son. Give us two or three more acts of God on this drive, and we'll be lucky ef we hit Aberlene with fifty head of cows to skin. We-all may have to sell our saddles to get home."

"Then I wouldn't get no new shirt?"

"I ain't promising you none."

"Well," said Len Hersey philosophically, reaching in a pocket for loose tobacco, "so long's a man has got his spurs he don't need a thousand shirts nohow. I don't see nothing to worry about."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THIRTY-SIX

ONE delay after another, one disaster with another, the Del Sol adventurers now were far into their second month on the trail. The summer was approaching, although they had as yet made scarce more than three-fourths of their entire distance to the railroad. Day after day they advanced over a wholly unsettled country that lay for nearly its entire length between the more settled civilized tribes on the east and the buffalo range toward the west. Clinging in their wavering line fairly close to the ninety-eighth meridian, without a guide, watch, calendar or compass, they now had reached a region beautiful as a wilderness, but soon to be the seat of a later and undreamed civilization.

They had been in wilderness practically all the way. At that time Austin was little more than a straggling country town. The herd cast dust into the one street of Fort Worth, then boasting not over one hundred inhabitants; and that was the last of the upper Texas towns. But what a line of cities was to follow their path on ninety-eight!

In the Indian Nations they had crossed the Washita, where now stands the thriving town of Chickasha, Oklahoma. El Reno, of Oklahoma, was grassland

then, near the ford of the North Fork of the Canadian. Kingfisher was not dreamed of on the trail from the North Fork to the Cimarron; and beyond that the city of Enid was to wait until long after cattle days were gone and the cattle trail had moved itself much farther to the west. Above them they aimed for Caldwell, just across the Kansas line then but a ragged frontier town. Thence the wagon tongue pointed toward Wichita, when Wichita was hardly more than a furrow in the ground, "a mile long and an inch wide." A railroad was still unforeseen in any of these vicinities in 1867; but railroads soon were to follow, almost in the footsteps of the earliest herd to Abilene. So much, to make understandable the exultation of these men as they discovered for themselves a country, or a succession of countries, absolutely virgin so far as the white man was concerned; a pastoral empire that never has had a parallel.

Whether by accident or design, the location of their northbound path was a lucky or a shrewd one. Scarcely anywhere else would there have been so few Indians to disturb them, nor could their experience easily be repeated. The depredations of the tribesmen, their begging of the drovers, their demands of tribute of all the northbound herds were still in the future, since as yet the Indians had not learned of the northern passing of the white men which was to come in a great wave in the ensuing years; and since not many tribes knew this herd was passing. The Del Sol men were pioneers.

How rich, how wildly alluring, this unsullied world which now was all their own to enjoy! Their wild

cattle now advanced quite usually in sight of an almost continuous spectacle of wild buffalo, wild horses, wild deer. At times the herd had to be held while a body of buffalo was parted by rifle fire to let them through. There seemed no end to the animal life of the region into which they came. It was all so different from Texas now that they felt themselves strangers in a foreign land.

Their next river was the Cimarron, one more stream heading down from the high, dry buffalo plains of the Panhandle to the sandy reaches and the flat loam lands to the eastward. Making down out of the strip of scrubby timber which they encountered below their crossing, the herdsmen made short work of the Cimarron, which was at so low a stage that the carts were driven through and the cattle did not have to swim at all.

Their start had been approximately at the thirtieth degree of latitude. They had now reached, just above the Cimarron crossing, the parallel of thirty-six, which later represented, as well as any arbitrary delineation, the vague dividing line between the southern and the northern ranges.

Above them now by one degree of latitude lay the south line of Kansas; between, the narrow unsettled and unorganized east-and-west tract so long known as the Cherokee Strip or the Cherokee Outlet. The existence of this strip of land was proof that the greatest range of the buffalo lay yet farther to the west, in the short-grass land; for forty years before this time the Cherokees had fought the Osages to secure an outlet over their land to the buffalo range

beyond. But of all these things also the Del Sol men were ignorant or careless. They did not know where they were.

Roll along, little dogies, roll along! You broke one of the greatest paths in all the world! You carried the South into the North! It was you who ended the war!

"Roll along, little dogies, roll along!"

The lazy song of half-somnolent riders, ragged, lean, brown, rose on the afternoon air of one more sunny day after sunny day. By this time the herd had but one more considerable stream, the Salt Fork of the Arkansas, between it and the main stream of the Arkansas. The men now all were studying geography as best they might, for gradually they all had concluded that Texas was far behind them, and that they were in a world they knew not.

"She's shore a perty country, Miss Taisie," said Jim Nabours when they paused for their noonday rest, the first stop north of the Cimarron. "It looks to me like folks could almost live here, some day, though I don't see no cows nowheres."

He could not dream that within a few short years there would be cattle under fence in all that country; that long before that time abundant strays would run wild as wild horses; that even then stretched illimitedly the great upper range, wholly undiscovered, soon to be clamoring for cows, to carry on a business which was then an unsuspected thing.

"Come along here, Miss Taisie," he continued, inviting her to take a seat beside him on the grass and spreading down a crumpled sheet of brown paper. It

held what cannot be bought to-day for any money—a more or less precise map of the first old cow trail from Texas north, although only his rude amateur hand had drawn it. The clumsy finger of the trail boss pointed out to his employer their locality as near as he himself could guess it.

"Dan McMasters and me talked this over afore he quit us," he explained. "I've drawed it the best I could, and it's sort of helpful too. Near as I can figure it, we're just about to cross thirty-six north. My pap told me that thirty-six-thirty was where slavery ended and the damn Yankees begun."

"Yes; the Missouri Compromise," nodded Taisie.

"Anyways my pap told me that thirty-six, along in there, was about where cotton wouldn't grow so well nohow, and where the ticks probably would fall offen the cows in the wintertime. The line must come right about here."

"What line?" demanded Len Hersey, who was listening in and who now bent over the rude map curiously. "I kep' a clost look all the time we've been on the trail, an' so fur from seein' any thirty-six lines atween here and where we all started, I ain't seen nary line a-tall."

"They ain't marked on the ground, man," replied his leader gently; "it's only on the paper. But what can I expect of a boy raised on squirrel and corn pone, like you was? Yes, sir; thirty-six is just in and around right here."

He made on this soiled paper a little cross, using a gnawed stub of a pencil which in its time had tallied perhaps a hundred thousand cows.

"There ain't no moss on the trees no more," mused Len. "The grass ain't the same here. My law! did you ever see so many greenhead flies in your borned days as we've had all the way from the Red River north? And as for mosquitoes, Miss Lockhart," he added, "a feller don't darst get his arms out of his blankets at night."

He looked ruefully at his elbows, entirely visible through the sleeves of his only shirt.

"Like enough a man could make some corn up here," mused Jim Nabours, sagely, looking around him over the rolling prairie. "He couldn't raise no cows; it'd be too cold. No, nor of course he couldn't raise no cotton. Well it's a right purty country; but can't never be settled, even if the Osages was gone."

"I wonder how big a place is Aberlene, anyhow," queried the ragged cowhand. "Me, I never seen a railroad. Down at Fort Worth several men been saying there'd be a railroad there some time. That's all foolishness."

"Shore it is," said Nabours. "Well, we got no railroad here neither. Let's move along."

They were now, although they were not aware of it, to pass up the course of Turkey Creek towards the Salt Fork for two days' march above the Cimarron. When they came to the heads of that stream and of Mulberry Creek, which ran thence southeast—also a stream unknown to any map at that time—they reached a pleasant rolling plain where it seemed as though the entire country was alive with moving game. It was a spectacle which awakened even their blasé souls, used to wild game all their lives.

Northward appeared a vast herd of buffalo, usually a most welcome sight to the plains traveler, but one always dreaded by the drover, who sometimes had to start a road through them at cost of much ammunition. Antelope, wild horses, all the great game of the unfrequented plains were visible also. But all this game was on the move and not feeding peacefully, as naturally it should be. Why was this?

Nabours came back as soon as he sensed the nature of what lay ahead.

"Throw 'em off, boys!" he called hurriedly. "Hold 'em in here and don't go a foot further, or we'll lose every hoof we've got. That country's full of buffalo and everything else, and something has set them going."

Leaving his best men to keep the cattle under control, he took with him two or three men and rode rapidly on ahead. They pulled up at a little eminence.

"Great Snakes!" said one of the men. "Just look there!"

The entire country was dotted with scattered black masses of moving buffalo. The numbers seemed endless, uncountable. Something had pushed them east of the more abundant short-grass range far to the westward.

"We'll have to break that up or we'll never get through," said Nabours. "Yet I was thinking this country up here wouldn't feed cows! Just look at the game!"

They could see also band after band of wild horses, magnificent animals with high heads and heavy manes and tails; creatures that never failed to awaken keen enthusiasm among even the most experienced plains-

man. Now, also, they were in an elk country, and herds of these creatures trotted off, following the same general drift to the east and south. There was such an immeasurably vast blending of wild life as not any one of these men ever expected to see again.

"Look! Look, men!" called Nabours, who was studying the sight eagerly. "If that ain't cows I'm a liar!"

He was entirely right. Caught in the general drift, there were two or three score of domestic cattle, of no man might tell what origin; no doubt outcasts or strays of some Osage Indian settlement to the east. The sight of these especially caused the blood of the range men to leap.

"Don't tell me this ain't a good country!" exclaimed Nabours. "Them's cows!"

"They've got right funny horns," said Lem Hersey critically; and forsooth these cattle, descendants of some Eastern stock, even then lacked the wide horns of the old Texan breed.

"I ain't particular about their horns," remarked Nabours. "They got hide enough to hold the Fish-hook brand, and they look like strays to me. Any of 'em comes around here too clost I ain't going to let his horns stand in the way. We need some more strays.

"But ef once our herd gets in there they'll be strays too. We've got to hold 'em back, boys, and wait till this thing gets by. This is a general movement of the range stuff, plumb out of the country, and if our cows begin to drift with this it'll be worse than anything we've run into yet."

"Hark!" A man threw up his hand. "What's that? Shooting on ahead?"

They sat their horses, uncertain. The sound of rifle fire in their experience was usually a signal of danger.

"Wait! Wait, men!" Nabours in turn raised a hand.

The sound of rifle fire was unmistakable. The heavy reports were borne by the prairie winds across what might be a mile of open space. The detonations were spaced almost mathematically alike.

"That's not Injuns!" exclaimed Jim Nabours. "That's a white man! He's got a stand on a bunch of buffalo: I'll bet a horse that's what it is."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TRAIL MAKER

THE reports came steadily—ten, fifteen, twenty. It was easy for the trail men to locate the rifleman. They advanced rapidly in his direction. As they topped a little ridge there lay before them the last scene of one of countless similar tragedies of the Plains then going on all over the country a thousand by fifteen hundred miles in extent.

Within the circle of a shallow swale stood a huddled group of black figures of buffalo still on their feet. Among them, around them, over a space no larger than a half acre, lay motionless or struggling two score other dark figures—the bodies of the fallen.

The drovers saw the rifle smoke, two hundred yards from the game. The killer lay concealed back of a wisp of grass which topped a near-by ridge. He lay flat, his heavy rifle supported by two cross sticks, his wiping rod and another hickory wand held together by the fingers of his left hand as a rest for the barrel. His hat was off. His hair tossed, blending with the waving grasses. He never had shown himself at all. Mercilessly, carefully, he placed one shot after another. At each shot a dust spot spurted out on a dark hide. An animal staggered, made a little run; but, shot through the lungs, soon lay down. The survivors

smelled at it, made short rushes, returned, stood confused. Each time one of the victims headed out, it fell before the white puff of smoke which came from the hidden death engine.

The killer had the range perfectly. He paid no attention to the result of any shot, for he knew that it was fatal. Each heavy bullet tore through the lungs of a buffalo. It would not go far. The ground was black with them already. Some day the bone pickers would rejoice, for here they would find fifty skeletons packed close together.

It was the "stand" of the professional or the expert buffalo hunter. The skin hunters were even then pushing out into the Plains on their unholy calling.

But the skin hunter did not belong to the Indian lands, and no Indian hunted buffalo in this way. The Del Sol men therefore were not sure as to the identity of this man. They rode off to investigate, not showing themselves at first. But at length they did sharpen on the sky line. The staggered remnant of the befuddled animals caught their scent in the air and at last nerved themselves for a saving rush away from this slaughter hole.

When he saw the intruders the rifleman himself drew back to safety. After a short mutual reconnaissance he rose and held up his hand in the sign of peace. The Del Sol men approached in like fashion.

The marksman might now be seen to be a man of anywhere from forty to sixty years of age, wrinkled of face, crowned with stubbly hair. His dark, thick skin showed him to be of mixed blood. His garb was that of the white man, save that he wore no hat. He leaned

on his deadly rifle with unconcern and in silence as the trail men approached.

"How, friend!" saluted Nabours.

"How do you do?" replied the other in fair English. "Which way you go?"

"North. We've got a herd of cows, three thousand head, five miles south of here."

"Three thousand head! Ha! You go Ab'lene—Caldwell—Wich'ta?"

Yes, if we can ever get through here. I was wondering what had drifted the buffalo."

"I kill 'em few for hides," grinned the half-breed. "My man come pretty soon for skin. My camp over, there, maybe so two mile. Where you come from?"

"Caldwell County," answered Nabours. "Our brand is T. L. You're headed south? Are you buffalo hunting?"

"No, got wagon train—Army supplies. Take 'em south from railroad across Nations, for Caddoes, Wichitas, Wacos. I just laying out road for wagons. Army forts got to have supplies."

"Well, the country needs a road all right," commented Nabours. "We started to find what they call the Chisholm Trail. There ain't no such a thing."

"No?" The oldish face wrinkled into a smile. "No find 'em trail? Too bad! You don't know me," he added after a time.

"No, we don't know nobody."

"I'm Jesse Chisholm. My ranch is in Nations, south long way. I bring plenty horses up from Texas. I know your people. I been all across Texas from Palo

Pinto to Double Mountain Fork, Buffalo Gap, Estacado; all the time I make trails."

"And you have left one behind you now?"

"Sure! She's easy from here to Caldwell. I got fifty wagon, plenty horse, plenty mule; make ford, somtime make bridge, sometime make raft. I got some wagons for Colonel Griswold. He's going to make big reservation for Kiowas and Comanches. Fort Sill, he'll call 'em."

"So you're Jesse Chisholm?" remarked Jim Nabours after a time. "I didn't know for sure there was no such person. Tell me, is there such a place as Aberlene?"

"Sure! I trail up Arkansas River from east, pass Wichita. I hear Ab-lene up north. Sure!"

"All the Injuns know Jesse Chisholm," he continued. "Osage, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw—I trade 'em horse all through there. I know Shawnee Trail, through Choctaws."

"Then tell us, friend, since you know this country pretty well, how far is it out of the Nations from here?"

"Maybe so fifty-six mile. Caldwell, he's on line above Osages. Always grass. So you go Ab'lene?"

Nabours nodded.

"We don't know where it is."

"You come my camp with me. I got a man in my camp, he come from Ab'lene. He come down here to find you people."

"Find us? He never heard of us!"

"I dunno. He say he come south till he meets cows. He show you Ab'lene all right."

"Len, ride back to the men and tell them to hold the

herd till I come," said Nabours, turning. "I may be late. I'll go over and see what there is in all this."

Without further speech, the famous half-breed trail maker led them back for a quarter of a mile or so to where he had picketed his horse. Soon they passed another uncommunicative half-breed, driving a wagon team. A few words between him and Chisholm, and the driver passed on to begin his share of the work—skinning the dead buffalo, for their hides alone.

In time they found the wagon encampment, its band of horses and mules hobbled or picketed near by; a pleasant though extraordinary sight in these surroundings. Chisholm led the way to a point a few yards distant from the main camp.

Lying on his saddle blankets under the shade of a scrubby bush, there was a white man—a bearded man of middle age, with clothing not much worn and of distinctly Northern cut. Caught by a severe attack of fever and ague, he now was in a raging fever. But at the sight of these newcomers—who presentiment told him were the very men he sought—he sprang to his feet and held out his hand.

"I knew you'd come!" said he. "I know you are drovers! Where is your herd? I told them I'd find a herd coming up to Abilene this spring. McCoyne's my name."

"Well," said the trail boss, "they call me Jim Nabours. We're people from Caldwell County, Texas —thousand miles south of here for all I know, or anyway six hundred. We're in the T. L.; Fishhook road brand. We was headed for Aberlene."

"That's my town," said the stranger. "And I'll

tell you, friend, she is a town! We've got the railroad, and I've got the stockyards, built and waiting. Don't let no one talk to you about Baxter Springs; don't you think of stopping at Caldwell or Wichita. Abilene is the only town in Kansas with a railroad and a stockyards and a real market. There's buyers five deep a-waiting for you up there. How many cattle you got?"

"Say three thousand."

"Great Scott! Abilene's made! You're made too!"

"How much did you pay for cows when you started north?" he asked. Nabours was looking at his eyes.

"You ain't so sick!" said he. "Well, we didn't pay nothing for ours. We raised them by hand from calves. How much can a man get for fine fours in your neighborhood?"

"Well, that depends; but all they're worth. Do you want to contract yours as they come, straight fours at ten a head?"

"Ten a head!" said Jim Nabours with well-feigned surprise. "What? Fours like them? Fat and ready for market? Well there may be a little she-stuff in here and there, but we couldn't help that. Us Texans always figgers one cow's as old and as fat as another."

"As good as any," asserted the stranger. "There's millions of acres of range north and west of Abilene, a-weeping and a-wailing for stock cattle. There's millions of pounds of beef that's got to be raised on Army contracts to feed the reservation Indians. There's all America and all Europe east of here. Market? Why, man, we can take five million cattle, in five years, if you can bring them in! You're the first, and you

didn't know it! You didn't even know where Abilene was!"

"We don't yet," replied Nabours; "but we're willing to rock along with you and have you show us."

"I'll be glad to! What d'you say to three cents a pound on the hoof?"

Nabours looked at him with astonishment in his eyes.

"Mister, you talk like them cows was sugar or coffee. I never did hear of ary man selling a cow that way. No man can tell how much a cow weighs by looking at him, and I never did see one weighed. Of course, I could make a scales by swinging a pole and putting a few men at the other end of it to balance up a cow—you can guess how much a man weighs pretty clost. But all that'd take too much time. No, a cow is a cow where I come from, whether he's big or little."

"Well, what d'you say to eleven dollars a head?"

"I don't say nothing. These here cows is family pets, and we don't like fer to part with them. But like enough this is the only herd that ever will come up from Texas, anyhow this year."

"You wouldn't say twelve dollars?"

"Straight count, a cow for a cow, as she tallies out?"

"Well, I'd sorter like to see the herd first."

"It ain't no trade," said Nabours calmly. "If I'd sell them family favorites of ours the owner of Del Sol would feel sore—she shore would."

"You say 'she' would. Are you working for a widow?"

"She ain't a widow yet, but she may be a'fore long."

"Married?"

"The same answer. Not yet, but right apt to be."

"How old is she?"

"Why, I don't know. Plenty of cows we got in that herd is a heap older than she is."

"And you're taking a girl through to Abilene!"

"What's wrong with Aberlene, friend?"

"Well," admitted McCoyne, "we got eight saloons and five gambling palaces now; a good many railroad men and skin hunters and people like that hang around. It might be a little bit swift if you ain't used to traveling fast."

"What you say sounds cheerful. We'd like to wet the dust in our throats and play a few cards in a innocent way."

"I wouldn't say that Abilene ain't safe," argued the market man. "We got the best town marshal in Kansas, or are going to have if we can get him away from Hays City. Wild Bill Hickok is his name. He's the best shot in Kansas."

"He may be in Kansas, but he ain't in Texas," replied Nabours. "We had him along ourselves. You didn't happen to meet up with a man named Dan McMasters in Caldwell, did you?"

McCoyne drew himself up.

"I don't go to Caldwell. But since you mention it, that name sounds familiar. I met a McMasters over in the Baxter Springs country last winter; tall fellow, with a little mustache. He was the man that told me he was going to send up a Texas herd when he got back home."

"He done so," replied Nabours. "Here it is."

"He certainly done us both a good turn. I was say-

ing McCoyne—Joe McCoyne's my name. I come from Indianny. I'm president of the stockyards up to Abilene. The whole Eastern country is out here hunting cattle. There's a thousand miles of range north and west of us that's got to have cattle. Why, cattle will be gobbled up as fast as you can drive them in."

"You must be running a kind of cow heaven, friend," said Jim Nabours. "Well, come and see our boss. You needn't be scared, even if she ain't married. I will pertect you against any designing female that might be smit by your looks."

CHAPTER XXXV

IN THE BEGINNING

THE Del Sol men with their new-found friend turned back to bid a temporary farewell to Jesse Chisholm and his wagon train, departing thereafter for the herd, which had been held some miles below. The Eastern man sat his horse somewhat strangely to the eyes of the Texans; but no matter what the speed, he ceased not joltingly to sound the praises of his community.

"Every time he come down in the saddle he says, 'Aberlene! Aberlene! Kerchunk! Aberlene!' " explained Len Hersey to his fellows.

When they came into view of the great herd, held closely by the riders, Nabours pulled up with the enthusiasm of the natural drover.

"Look at 'em!" he exclaimed, waving a hand. "If that ain't a perty sight I don't know what is!"

"Great glory!" exclaimed the Abilene man. "I didn't know there were that many cattle in the world! Sir, my fortune is made! Where'd you get them all?"

"In Texas we don't ast no man that. I told you we done raise them cows by hand, every one of them."

The Abilene man gave a deep sigh.

"You don't know what that means!" said he. "The first herd up from Texas!" He babbled, speaking of revolutions, epochs, swift changes.

One by one he met the wild crew of the Del Sol men, who wore a garb and spoke a language unfamiliar to himself. Praying for trail herds from the South, the Northern men never really visualized the new personnel which was pushing north from the lower range. Indeed at that time of the American civilization there had been but little actual interchange of population between the North and the South. The natural expansion of the republic had been westward. As to the old cruel line of Mason and Dixon, it never fully was broken down by the Civil war. But here was the first break —the penetration of a peaceful, natural commerce, here on the Western plains. Through that opening, in the years immediately to come, flowed values greater than those of barter and trade in horned kine. A manly understanding passed back and forth, and out of that a tacit union, a concord in all young strong impulses. That union of North and South built the West overnight. The world has never seen a better country.

That empire gave us our first and only true American tradition—the tradition of the West. Great as that American tradition is, grotesque as we have rendered it, far as we have carried from dignity and truth the tradition of the West, "the Range" still is a word to conjure with to-day, and will be to-morrow. Here, then, was the very beginning of that great tradition. It was no more than a generation ago.

"My Lord!" repeated the Northern man. "Just look at them! I guess that's all the cattle in the world."

"No, I don't reckon so," replied Nabours. "We got sever'l left down in Texas. Come along; you must meet the owner of them all."

They approached Taisie Lockhart's camp where the giant carts—things of wonder to the stockyards man—stood gaunt and grim in the twilight. Taisie was superintending the preparation of the evening meal, her women busy at the fire. At first the Northern man took her to be one of the young riders of the herd. She stood straight and free of self-consciousness as any of the men; as brown of face and hand, much like them in apparel. She wore the universal checked trousers, stuffed into her boots. But the boots apparently had been made by loving hands, so neat were they, so sewed with countless little seams. And at their tops, in red, was the Lone Star of Texas.

Taisie's cotton shirt, a man's shirt, was open at the neck. Above the high-water mark of the ardent sun, protected by her hat brim, flowed back the mass of her bright hair, which for sake of comfort she wore now, as customarily, in a great queue wrapped with thong, as though she were some Indian woman. True, she might have been the forerunning arbiter of woman's ways of costume fifty years later in the West; but Taisie Lockhart's dress was not done in any imitation or any affectation. She had chosen it for two reasons—firstly, because she was broke; secondly, because it was convenient.

"Miss Lockhart," remarked Jim Nabours in the formula which he best knew, "shake hands with Mr. —— What did you tell me your name was?"

"McCoyne—Joe McCoyne, of Abilene, ma'am. I'm

pleased to meet you." Which also was in conformance with ineradicable formula.

Taisie held out her hand in silence, with her usual straight glance.

"You didn't expect to see me down here from Abilene, did you, Miss Lockhart?" began the stockyards man.

"Why, no sir; are we almost there?"

"Right there. It ain't much over two hundred mile. I knew there'd be a herd up this year. I was telling your foreman that I met a Mr. McMasters, Daniel McMasters, a while back, over around Baxter Springs. He said he was going down to Central Texas. You don't happen to know him?"

The swift blood surged up to Taisie's forehead.

"Why, yes; he rode with us for a time."

But the Northern man was all for business. He cleared his throat.

"Miss Lockhart," said he, "I've been offering your man twelve dollars a head straight through. I'd contract for them at that right here."

Taisie Lockhart gave a sudden gasp. Twelve dollars a head meant riches! But she turned toward her trail boss, who had emitted an ominous cough, audible a quarter of a mile, and began now to wink so portentously that even the blind must have given him attention. She hesitated, her eyes dubious. The stranger laughed.

"I see you've got to talk it over together."

But his zeal for Abilene overcame even his own disposition to do a turn in personal trade. Besides, the personality of this young woman produced its usual effect, on him as on most men.

"I want to buy your cattle, Miss Lockhart," said he, "and maybe I will; but let's not talk price any more down here. This is the first herd to come to Abilene, and I'm going to see that you get the best price possible, so when you carry the news back to Texas that'll bring more herds up next year. I don't want to rob as young and fine-looking a woman as you are; and besides that, the first one to come up the trail."

"And the last!" said Jim Nabours conclusively. "You don't know what I've been through!"

The stranger smiled humorously, his eyes once more turning to the young girl, of unmistakably gentle breeding. "In a way, you don't belong here," said he.

"Come an' git it!" came the supper call of Buck, the negro cook, now rising at his fireside.

The men not engaged on the herd straggled in toward the fire. The distant crooning of the hands at the bed ground came through the twilight. The stockman threw back his shoulders, drew a deep breath.

"I been having a little fever and ague, ma'am," said he; "but come to think of it, it's quit. I'd rather be here than any place else in the world."

"We have quinine," said Taisie Lockhart, "and coffee and boiled beef, and some very good bread that Milly has made. Won't you please sit down with us?"

They all sat upon the ground around the little fire, children, contented. The world still was young.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ROLL ALONG, LITTLE DOGIES!

LATE at night the leaders of the herd sat talking, but the start on the next day was early. The country ahead was now open and free of buffalo. Once more the great herd trailed out. They left the camp of Jesse Chisholm with his wagon train a little at one side, but the leaders rode over to say farewell to the taciturn old half-breed. McCoyne promised him many things if he would load his next cargo at Abilene instead of Wichita. And so they parted, as ships sailing seas but little known.

Thence on there was no need for the wagon tongue or the North Star. One Chisholm Trail, of many mythical ones, was now really begun. The marks of the wagon wheels were unmistakable. The giant steers of the Del Sol vanguard swung out along the main traveled road as though this was what they long had sought. McCoyne expressed wonderment at seeing so few men handle thousands of great animals.

"You've been doing ten or twelve miles a day?" said he. "We can make fifteen or twenty. Push them along. All Abilene is waiting for them."

It was plain sailing and the weather was good. No tribute-seeking Indians appeared, and the cattle were as peaceable as though they never had dreamed of a run. The Del Sol outfit put mile after mile behind

it, rapidly, steadily, the work oxen on the carts sometimes almost on a trot, the sore backs exempt in the remuda, every man feeling that trail's end was not so far.

Between them and the Arkansas River now ran only one considerable stream—the Salt Fork, spoken of with respect by drovers, for quite customarily it offered swimming water. But now, even if the advanced season had not left the water low, the Salt Fork would have been by no means an insuperable obstacle, for Jesse Chisholm had left here a good raft which he had built for his own purposes. It was better than a bridge. The cattle swam the stream readily, confidently, and in brief order the carts were jerked across at the ends of spliced reatas. The entire crossing went forward methodically and without the loss of a single head.

"So that's the way you do it?" commented the man of Abilene. "You had some rivers below here too?"

"Almost. This here is play compared to it," said Nabours. "But you can go anywheres with cows if you know how. That's the only thing us Texans does know. Yes, we got sever'l cows down in Texas. And I don't see why this country here wouldn't raise cows—in the summer anyhow."

They advanced through the Osage country, over as beautiful grassland as a man ever saw, the prairie covering wavering knee-deep and spotted with many flowers. Wild game was in sight much of the time. There was not a weed. No plow had been here.

"Roll along, little dogies!" came the lazy voice of a swing man. "Roll along, roll along!"

Fifty miles more of happy, lazy, carefree loafing along the trail, and they left the straggling village of Caldwell on the right, just at the Kansas line. Nabours would not let his men go into town, but headed twenty miles to the westward across the grasslands of lower Kansas, making for the crossing of the Arkansas which Chisholm had established with his wagons.

Heretofore the advance had been happily and singularly free from annoyance at the hands of the Indian tribes whose great domain had been crossed. When well over the Kansas line, however, they were caught up by a little band of Osages who had followed along their trail, ignoring reservation limits for reasons of their own. In stature they were gigantic men, their heads partly shaved, leaving a high roach of dense, stiff hair after the traditional Osage custom. They were painted bravely enough in red and ocher, and all were armed with fine buffalo bows of *bois d'arc*. Their leader and his band seemed friendly enough and disposed to parley. Not caring for such hangers-on, Nabours and a few other men stopped for a conference. The chief began with a request soon to become usual along the trail.

"You got plenty wohaw," he began. "This Injun country. You give wohaw."

He held up all the fingers of his hand.

"Give you ten cows?" exclaimed Jim Nabours. "I ain't give a cow to nobody all the way up the trail, and I won't give one to you. You go on back."

"Good Injun!" said the leader of the Osages. He handed out a folded piece of paper. "Caldwell. Him send."

He was a message bearer. Nabours took the letter.

"Why, this is from Dan McMasters!" said he. "Five days ago he was in Caldwell. Says he has gone on now to Wichita," explaining to McCoyne and the others. "He may be at Aberlene by the time we get there."

"Say, you, here!" he remarked to the chief. "We'll give you one wohaw. You set down and wait a while. We'll ride on up to the wohaws."

"All right," said the Osage partisan in good humor. "Him say you give wohaw. We bring you paper."

They disposed themselves on the grass, their bows unstrung.

"You seem to be all the time hearing from this man McMasters," said McCoyne. "How come he's on ahead of you so far?"

"That's a long story," said Jim Nabours. "He did ride with us for a while."

"I knew that man over at Baxter and on the Missouri border," ruminated the man from Abilene. "Quiet sort of fellow—mysterious—never did say much. I was figuring on a market over there for Texas cattle. But I learned about a gang of raiders in there that had been cutting every herd that came up from Texas bound for Missouri or Iowa or Illinois. Those border ruffians killed probably a dozen men altogether. They tied up and whipped maybe a dozen more. They terrorized every trail outfit that came through there, and the natural result was that they kept off St. Louis from ever becoming a real cow town. Nothing could get through. A little thing sometimes makes a heap of difference later on in big things.

"The leader of that gang was a ruffian by name of Rudabaugh," he added. "The Missourians finally run him south."

"Yes," said Nabours quietly. "The Texans have finally run him north again."

"And this man McMasters was after him?" McCoyne turned suddenly.

"He might be. He is now. He's been keeping ahead of us, and that's the reason."

He now explained at length the machinations of the trail pirates and the untimely end of them in the night battle on the Washita.

"He mostly plays a lone hand," Nabours concluded. "He's an officer in the Rangers. That's putting law into Texas—the Rangers."

"Well, we've only got one man to put law into Abilene. I'm going to hire Wild Bill Hickok for our town marshal. Wild Bill has got these bad people buffaloed. Counting in his work as a Union sharpshooter, under Curtis, in the Missouri country, he'd have to have a long gun stock to carry all his notches. It's sure he's killed somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred men. In 1860, when he was taking care of the stage stock over in east of Abilene, he was jumped by McCandless and his gang—ten men there were in all. You've heard of that fight? They were going to run off the stage stock for the Confederate Army. They tackled Bill in his shack, ten of them, and he was alone. He killed nine out of the ten by himself. Not so bad, eh? I don't know as I ever knew Bill to serve a warrant or make an arrest. But I'll bet one thing—if we get him for town marshal, Abilene

will be first in graveyards, the same as she is first in everything else."

"It shore looks like Dan McMasters has a pleasant time a-waiting for him," commented Nabours. "But he's usual able to take care of hisself.

"Now, I'll have to cut out a beef for these yellow-bellied friends of ours," he added. "We've picked up a shorthorn stray or so a couple of days ago, and put a Fishhook on him to keep him from catching cold. Like enough it was a Osage steer, anyhow, so I reckon I'll let 'em have that one. Go cut it out, Len, when we come up with the herd."

Osages and all, they rode along. Easily, lazily, as though he knew precisely where the animal was, Len Hersey found it, rode it out of the herd and drove it back close to the Indian group.

"Here's your wohaw," he said.

The Osage chieftain smiled amiably. A bow twanged. In five minutes the ribs of the beef were broiling on a prairie Osage fire. The dust of the great herd of spotted cattle was lessening to the north.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ABILENE

IN THE front room of a raw board building, on which carpenters still were laboring noisily, sat a tall man at a table, pleasantly humming a tune to himself as he bent over his task.

In appearance he was a Viking; a very strong man, bulky, above six feet in height, and yet lithe, easy, graceful, with perfect coördination of physical faculties. His eye was very blue. His yellow hair was long, like that of ancient warriors; so long that it fell in ripples on his shoulders; and, as hair of any warrior should be, it was admirably kept.

The garb of this striking-looking man—one of the handsomest men that ever crossed the Missouri in the days of the frontier, which is much to say of males—was on the whole devoid of pretentiousness. His dark clothing was ready-made, but his boots never were ready-made. He showed the influence of the South, where a man may be slouchy in all things save as to his feet. This man's boots were of fine calf, closely cut to cover a small foot. A pair of gloves lay on the table, the best of buckskin. His hat, of the finest felt, was wide of brim and low of crown—the hat of the upper range, distinct from the steeple-crown Mexican sombrero.

Had the entire border been combed, a finer example of the better type of border man could not at that time have been found than this one. In any corner of the world his appearance would have called attention. Two or three men sitting across from him against the wall in the hotel office—for this building was no less than the Drovers' Cottage of Abilene, soon to be famous across the Western world—eyed him with silent respect as he sat busy, humming his carefree melody. They very well knew Wild Bill Hickok, whom rumor reported to be sought for as the new town marshal of Abilene, first of the cow camps.

The famous marshal of Hays City—as he then was—now was engaged in the daily task which he never neglected and never gave to hands other than his own—that of cleaning his two heavy revolvers. No hand but his ever had been allowed to touch one of these weapons, even in the slightest or most friendly way. He himself never failed to examine them every morning.

They were very long-barreled revolvers, and their owner's artistic fancy was indulged in them to the extent of ivory handles. The metal work was dark. The front sight on each had been filed down low. That was just before the day of fixed ammunition, and all revolvers still were muzzle-loaders as to the cylinders. Under the barrel of each piece worked a hinged ramrod, and the backs of the cylinders were indented and tubed to permit admission of the percussion caps. They handled a large round ball. Some of these, with the small flask of fine rifle powder, lay on the table near at hand. With a short, well-polished

round stick of hickory, Mr. Hickok was now engaged in cleaning barrel and cylinder so thoroughly that not a speck of dust remained. His boots and gloves were clean; his shirt was clean; his face and hands were clean; and, be sure, his guns were clean.

He finished his task at length, replaced each cylinder and pushed down the pin on which it revolved. Then, with eyes narrowing and lips pursed, he poured into each cylinder barrel an exact—very exact—charge of the fine powder, gently jolting each charge home, and on top, with the utmost care, seating the round ball and pushing it home with the hinged ramrod. Each load was precisely like every other load. Then he capped each nipple of the cylinder, held back each hammer and rolled the cylinder with ear intent to see that the click of the lock came absolutely even. After this he slipped the long weapons into the greased holsters at his heavy belt. His coat tails unobtrusively covered the equipment. He walked to the new wash-basin at the new sink, cleansed and wiped his hands on a towel not absolutely new; and so was ready for the duties of the day, whatever these might be.

"Well, Bill, going to get somebody to-day?" one of the loafing skin hunters against the wall guffawed, trying to be offhand, friendly and humorous. The tall man looked at him steadily, his own face absolutely emotionless, and made no reply at all. His dignity was that of a lion among small animals. He was a man of few confidences and no familiarities.

When Wild Bill Hickok stepped out into the street he saw coming across the railroad track a stranger, a young man tall as himself, though not so heavy of

build. The newcomer was clad much like himself, in dark clothing, with neat boots. His coat swung easily free, but to the specialized eye of Wild Bill it covered something on either side. Moreover, he presently noted that the young man wore his guns in an odd way—the right-hand stock pointing back, the left-hand one pointing forward. This peculiarity he had never seen in the equipment of any man, cowman, gambler or professional bad man. He asked himself, if this man should happen to be left-handed, or if he were a two-handed man, which gun would be used first? That constituted, as Wild Bill admitted then and there, a sort of mental problem which it might take the thousandth of a second to decide.

There was no pretentiousness about the newcomer, more than there was about Wild Bill Hickok. They both were simple, quiet men, low of voice, pleasant of address. Two more typical killers did not then stand west of the Missouri stream, although they were from widely separated countries. The range, north and south, upper and lower, ran well-nigh two thousand miles in its longer dimension, and covered wide variations in all types.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the young man, advancing. "I know this is Marshal Hickok. I am McMasters, sheriff of Gonzales County, down in Texas."

The blue-eyed man put out his hand readily.

"I know about you," said he. "You are in the Rangers, too, down there. That's a good body of men. I reckon they need to be good.

"Well, it's a lovely morning," he continued. "I've not had a drink yet this morning."

They walked down the ragged street, if street it could be called, passing over the railroad track, whose rails as yet hardly had been burnished by any wheels; a track which ran but a few hours' journey west of Abilene at that time. There was a switch which would accommodate perhaps twenty cars, some pens which would hold perhaps five hundred head of cattle, some chutes which never yet had been used. Like all the rest of Abilene, the yards presented an aspect of raw newness. The residential portion of the city consisted largely of sod houses, dugouts and canvas tents, although it did not lack unpainted pine in its more ambitious structures. The broken expanse of high-fronted wooden buildings along its single main street offered the appearance conventional in the new railroad town of the frontier of the West. There was a Golden Eagle Clothing Store; two or three offering general merchandise. There was no drug store, but there were two barber shops and the Twin Livery Barn. There was no church or school. But, as the apostle of Abilene had said, there were many saloons and free dance-halls, each in its way openly advertising its wares.

Toward the saloon of his choice—which also apparently offered dance-hall accommodations at seasonable hours—Wild Bill bent his steps. The interior still presented a certain dishabille. A sleepy negro was sweeping out the corks. A barrel in a corner held empty bottles in careless profusion. The chairs presented an order apparently not preconcerted, and the legs of some were broken. There was no billiard

table in all Abilene, and mahogany was not yet known in any bar of Abilene. None the less, here was a goodly plank, and back of it were arranged shelves still holding bottles of liquid contents in spite of the late obvious demand. The interior was not, to any imagination, howso violent, a lovely thing to see in the ghastly light of day. The light now was rather dim. Two or three kerosene lamps still were burning, yellow and sickly, not devoid of fumes, which joined the other fumes.

"I usually come here for my liquor," said Wild Bill, "because I know Henry Doak has a barrel of real bourbon, besides what he sells. It ain't poison. I never go against the liquor game very hard myself."

"It isn't best," said McMasters. "Still, the oldest man I ever knew told me he'd lived so long because every morning before breakfast he took two or three fingers of bourbon—when he could get it—and rubbed his chest with a fresh corncob."

"As good a way as any," said Hickok. "A man never dies till his time comes—and then he does."

He was humming to himself as he searched for the bottle which suited him.

"No three or four fingers for me," said he. "Too much, especially if you have got anything particular to do."

A short gray man with white mustache and goatee shuffled in, not vouchsafing any speech at all. He brought them glasses and motioned Bill to a quiet corner of the room, where at the hour they found themselves quite alone.

"Well, Mr. McMasters," said Bill, "I am glad to

see you in Abilene, and I wish you were going to live here. It's not just the healthiest place for a peace officer. It maybe won't be any healthier if the Texas herds ever do begin to come in."

"I know of one on the way," said McMasters. "It will be in now almost any day."

Hickok nodded.

"They used to drive up the Neosho in towards Sedalia, a few years ago. Those toughs in there used the trail men mighty rough. Dougherty, Ellison, Hunter, McMasters, Lockhart—they were all good men that tried to drive in there from Texas. It would have paid St. Louis to have sent her whole police force down there and cleaned up that gang of cattle bandits. They've just headed off all the Texas cattle that came up that way."

"Yes, I know about that pretty well," assented Dan McMasters. "You say McMasters. Calvin McMasters was my father. They killed him. He was a friend of Colonel Burleson Lockhart. They killed Lockhart too. I've been in there since, once or twice, on business of my own. That gang were very largely friends of Dave Tutt."

Their eyes met silently. Dave Tutt was a man whom Wild Bill Hickok killed in a street duel on the public square of Springfield, Missouri, in the presence of his friends, all of whom had threatened to kill Hickok on sight.

"Well, those people couldn't seem to make a living any way except by robbing folks," said the border man after a while. "The real brains of that outfit was

a fellow called Rudabaugh—Sim Rudabaugh. I heard that he went South; to Austin, I think."

"Yes, he got some sort of Northern political pull back of him I don't just know how. He has given us a fine example of organized Reconstruction politics. He has put on foot the biggest plan of wholesale cow stealing and land stealing and general highway robbery that ever was started even in Texas."

"Using his old trade, eh? Working large?"

"Yes. Just now he's getting hold of all the land scrip the state ever issued—you know Texas retained her own lands when she came in. His plan is to get hold of about all of Texas north of the Buffalo gap, and then to steal cows enough east of that to stock the whole Staked Plains."

"That sounds like a pretty large order!" smiled Hickok.

"It is a large order. The man is crazy who would ever think of it. I don't doubt that Sim Rudabaugh is crazy—crazy with his own egotism and his success in deeds that no sane man ever could have thought of doing."

"Have you got any personal quarrel?" asked Hickok of him quietly.

"That word doesn't cover it, sir! Mr. Hickok, I have said that Rudabaugh killed my father and Colonel Lockhart. That is, I am practically sure of it. My father was sheriff of Gonzales before they put me in. I could not refuse. I knew I was elected to end the Rudabaugh gang.

"Quarrel? I can't call it by so small a name. For every reason in the world I have got to have that man

dead or alive. And you'll think I am crazy myself," he added, "when I tell you I want him alive. He is worth much more to Texas alive than dead. The fact is, the whole peace of Texas—and the whole end of the big steal in Texas—depends on my bringing that man in, not dead but alive."

Hickok looked at him in silence for a time.

"You have had to shoot sometimes."

"Several times. I have made a good many arrests as sheriff in my county and as a captain in the Rangers in other counties."

Hickok shook his head. A light drinker, he pushed his glass aside not much more than tasted.

"No good in making arrests. There is only one way with a man like that—let him make his break."

McMasters went on to explain the circumstances of Colonel Griswold's talk with Yellow Hand, below the Washita, giving the details of the fight.

"We put a pretty stiff crimp into them there," he said. "I don't think Rudabaugh has more than two of his best warriors with him—Baldy Collins and Ben Estill. He got Estill at Caldwell. He'll maybe pick up some more recruits over toward the Missouri line. He's been trailing our herd ever since we started out, maybe a thousand miles and he'll never quit if he can help it. As I have explained to you, it has been all to his interest to break up this herd. If word of its success got back to Texas this season, that would end his dream of cheap land and cheap cows. All Texas would be on its guard. You see why I want to arrest Rudabaugh. You will see, too, I've got to have him alive if possible."

"Then why do you want to see me? I'm not living in this town, though I may later. Besides, my specialty is not taking people alive." Wild Bill's forehead wrinkled in thought. "I don't believe in arrests for that kind of people."

"I'm not so particular about any of those men being alive except Rudabaugh," replied McMasters. "I haven't got any warrant for him, and can't get one, and couldn't stop to prosecute him if I had. I couldn't prove that he killed any of the drovers of the old Shawnee Trail. I don't want to prove anything. I've got no warrant and no requisition papers. All I want is to get my hands on him.

"But I can prove that he killed the two Indian women down near the Arbuckle Mountains. There is no white jurisdiction down there, and in Kansas it's no crime to kill Indians. But there won't be any habeas corpus if he is ever brought before the court of the Comanches. That's the court I want! That's what Griswold wants, and he wants that because it means peace with the Comanches. Don't you see? It means that they'll come in out of Texas and go on their reservation. That will open up everything. There'll be any number of cattle cross at Doan's Store, and even further west, as quick as the drovers know it is safe against the Comanches, in further west than where this herd crossed the Red.

"So you see, Mr. Hickok, just why I want Sim Rudabaugh alive. That's why I came to Abilene. I heard you were here, and I thought maybe Rudabaugh'd come here. If you don't mean the law here, there's going to be no law in Abilene."

Hickok sat for a time in silence.

"Well," said he at length, "I suppose I am generally intended to keep the peace. If I help you to get Rudabaugh in Kansas I am helping keep the peace in Kansas. And if they want me for town marshal here maybe I'd better give them a sample of the goods. Every town marshal in the world ought to help a Texas Ranger.

"But listen, friend," he continued; "when two men go into a business of this kind each puts his life in the other man's hands. Mostly I'd rather risk my life in my own hands. Are you a married man?"

"No, sir."

"Are you a good shot with a revolver?"

"Yes, sir."

Hickok rose lazily, leaving the liquor in his glass.

"Let's take a walk out of doors," he said.

They stepped to the front of the saloon and stood looking up and down the street. Some forty yards away a sign hung out over the walk: "Dance Hall and Saloon."

"I'll take the right-hand O," said Hickok quietly.

With the ease of great practice and native genius—and all the Army men rated Hickok as the best shot with rifle or revolver that the West ever saw—he raised one of his weapons to a high level and fired the six shots of the single-action piece with unspeakable rapidity. He carefully returned the gun to its place. He did not look at the sign. He knew!

"That's fine work, sir," said Dan McMasters with undisguised enthusiasm. "Your reputation is deserved.

A Paramount Picture.

RUDABAUGH (NOAH BEERY) AND DAN Mc MASTERS (JACK HOLT).

North of 36.

Quite often I doubt a man's reputation as a shot until I see him shoot."

"How about your own?" demanded Hickok. "I myself never shoot in public. I don't want anybody to know how I shoot."

"Nor I. My reputation? I haven't any this far north."

"Well, there's the left-hand O. Can you see the one I shot?"

"Perfectly," smiled McMasters.

"You've a good eye. Can you hit it one time out of six?"

"I can hit it six times out of six, sir."

"You think so?"

"I don't think so—I know it."

"Cut loose!" said Bill succinctly.

For an instant McMasters stood facing his mark, both hands poised above his heavy guns after his invariable fashion, which had swiftly become a tradition on the lower range. Hickok did not really see which gun he chose, his own eye for the time being fixed on the signboard. But a gun did rise in Dan McMasters' right hand. And once more, with perfect spacing, came six reports.

By this time a crowd had poured out in the streets Men were at their heels as the two walked close to the signboard. Wild Bill saw the six bullets grouped close, splintering one into the other at times, not one touching the outer rim of black.

His own eyes narrowed. He looked curiously, studiously, at the face of the first man he had ever been obliged to credit with pistol work approaching

his own. The face had changed. It had not lost its concentration. It was a mask, expressionless. Hickok studied the mask for a moment. He saw in it his own face also. He put a hand on McMasters' shoulder.

The two turned down the street, Hickok flinging back his long yellow hair in a gesture habitual with him.

"Take a good look at the work on them two signs, men," said he, accosting the curious followers. "You ain't apt to see better. This man and I are going to see peace and quiet in Abilene. He's my friend and my deputy.

"I didn't think the man lived that could do it," said he to McMasters as they walked away together. "Your six are bunched as good as mine, and your time is perfect. Come on down to the Cottage and let's sit around for a while.

"Hello, what's that?" he added. A group of men was coming up at a fast gait from the southern edge of the town. Among them was one, apparently a leader, whose rapid discourse occasionally was broken by wild whoops. "Who's that?" laughed Hickok. "Some more wild men from down the trail?"

In effect, it was Mr. McCoyne, explaining to the citizens of Abilene that beyond a peradventure he had met and traveled with an actual herd of cattle, actually bound for Abilene. Moreover, the said herd was then and there camped just below the Solomon, within easy reach of town.

This certainly was news of interest to McMasters as well as to Wild Bill Hickok. McCoyne was too much excited to identify any one, did not remember

McMasters, whom he had not recently seen and never had known well.

"Listen, men!" he shouted. "We've got to have a celebration. Get all the Eastern men together. Go see if our new band is sober enough to play any sort of tune. Get 'em down on the portico at the Drovers' Cottage in an hour or so. When I bring the herd into town, and we get right opposite the Cottage, tell 'em to strike up. We've got to show these people what a real live town is.

"Now, come on," he resumed. "I own a interest in the Spread Eagle Saloon"—it chanced to be the one whose sign had served for a target just now, later a matter of much pride to the owner—"but I'm going to change the name to Lone Star. Come on and have a drink with McCoyne, president of the Abilene Stockyards!"

By magic, from their tents and dugouts, their sod huts and log hovels and their residences of raw pine board, the men of Abilene assembled—border men, skin hunters, loafers, gamblers, thieves, citizens and aliens, merchants and cattle buyers; a throng sufficiently motley for a total population of a very hundred. They crowded into the saloon, formed an overflow meeting upon the outside; primitive men in a primitive day.

Around this primitive scene stretched a wide and primitive world. The blue sky, flecked with fleecy clouds, bent over an endless sea of grasses growing to the very edge of Abilene. The flowers nodded and beckoned in the gentle wind. Not a furrow of plow was there. These rude men of Abilene were fore-

runners of an inland empire soon to come but not yet over the horizon.

Hickok and McMasters did not go beyond the edge of the crowd. The former seemed now, as so often he was, absorbed in the sheer beauty of the prairies.

"It's pretty," said he, waving his hand. "I hate to think of its changing." A tinge of his occasional melancholy fell upon him. "Of course, it will change and change fast," said he. "Well, I was a part of this."

Without affectation, he spoke in the past tense. There never was a killer who gave himself a long life.

Inside the saloon, mounted on a chair, McCoyne, president of the Abilene Stockyards, was addressing the multitude.

"They're a strange-looking people, them Texans," he was saying. "They've got no wagons; only some carts, each with two yoke of oxen. There ain't a whole pair of breeches in the outfit, nor a decent hat. Every morning when a fellow wants a horse, where his rope lands, that's his—and he has to ride to stay with it. They can ride any horse in the world. They've got a fighting chicken on top of one cart and they say they'll bet the herd on that rooster—and here us folks ain't got a single one in Abilene! They'll bet anything you like they've got the fastest horses in Kansas. They say they've got a man they'll back in a shooting match against anybody in the world."

"They must mean Wild Bill," said a voice.

"No, his name is McMasters—Dan McMasters. But he ain't with them now. Besides that, they got something else; you can't guess. They've got a woman!"

"Aw, go on!" A voice.

"Yes, they have. Young woman, too, and prettier'n any picture you ever saw in a frame. She owns all the herd. She's rich as she is pretty. Her name's Lockhart, Miss Lockhart from Caldwell County, Texas, but not Caldwell, Kansas, gentlemen. She owns the Del Sol ranch down there. They raised this whole herd on that ranch; or anyhow that's what they say. Men, here's to Miss Anastasy Lockhart, the finest girl in the world and the first one up the Texas trail!"

Two men of the crowd who had been listening quietly stepped out at the door, looking at one another but not speaking. They passed close at hand; the future town marshal of Abilene and his deputy.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ALAMO ARRIVES

FOR the last two hundred miles of the long trail up from Texas, life was less eventful for the Del Sol men. The cattle now were shaken down to the daily routine of marching and gave little or no trouble. They took the smaller streams almost in their stride; and as to the last large waterway, no problem of note existed, for at the Arkansas River, the trail maker, Jesse Chisholm, again had provided passage in the scow he had left moored not far from Wichita after it had served his own purposes. It was merely a procession north of the Arkansas to Abilene, across beautifully undulating country whose attractiveness would have been hard to match in all America.

Arrived now at the Solomon River, however, almost at the environs of Abilene, they found that civilization had prepared a bridge—the first and only bridge of the entire journey of perhaps a thousand miles. It was a structure of raw pine, well meant enough, but done by men in ignorance of the actual nature of Texas steers. It served well enough for the carts, but the herd would have none of it and insisted on swimming, as they had crossed so many other streams. It was after they had crossed that, yielding to the supplications of McCoyne, a halt was called until the latter

could go into town and complete certain arrangements of his own. He asked Nabours to bring on the herd later.

For some anxious moments the apostle of Abilene stood in the street looking southward. At last he waved his hat.

"Here they come!" he cried.

Tears ran down his face, perhaps alcoholic tears, but not unworthy, and pulled up in his straggly beard. He had verified his prediction. Here came the cows!

A cloud of dust approached, blown by the prairie wind. By and by the men could see the head of the herd advancing steadily, a mingling sea of longhorns in a procession interminably long. The word passed now and even the saloons were emptied. All Abilene came to see and welcome the first herd up the trail. It seemed a large event to them. Not a man of them, not the wildest dreamer of them all, ever guessed that it was the opening of one of the greatest epochs in American history. Men even would have scoffed at the assertion that thirty-five thousand cattle would reach Abilene that year, seventy-five thousand the year following; that soon the state of Texas would be trailing north over a million head a year.

Ahead and alongside, mounted on wiry little horses, rode men ragged, coatless, long of hair, bearded; tall men, sinewy, insouciant. The saddles of these men had double girths, wide low horns and deep leather flaps hanging low over the feet of the riders. Each man had a thin hide reata coiled at his saddle horn. Each man wore a heavy belt at which hung a heavy revolver, and a few carried rifles under their legs. They came

easily, steadily, ahead, their own eyes full of wonder but not of fear.

Well to the front and paralleling the column to windward came the great wheeled carts with white tops, each drawn by two yoke of oxen. On the front seat of one sat a black woman, with a long musket across her lap. Upon yet another was an old woman, dark, wrinkled of face, attending strictly to her own business.

The tilt flaps of the lead cart were closed. The cattle which drew it followed the horseman who rode just ahead—an old man, of face also dark and wrinkled, who wore a very tall conical sombrero, the first of the like ever seen in Abilene, the only one of all his company. His cotton clothing was meager, he himself was meager, his horse was meager. Upon his saddle horn there was perched what proved to be a bird whose plumage bore a luster of its own; a bird somewhat battered and bedraggled, with certain feathers of wing and tail missing and a crest somewhat torn and dragging; which none the less raised its head from time to time and emitted a loud and defiant crow. At times Sanchez ran a thin brown hand over Gallina, his sole surviving fighting cock.

Back of this cart marched, saddled and bridled, a singular horse, beautiful of head and crest, its dark yellow body coat broken by white markings, a broad band of white from side to side across its hips.

In the vanguard of the herd proper marched a great gaunt steer, a giant in stature, long of limb and wide of horn, a yellow dun in color. It now was coming on with a rapid sidewise shuffle, not dissimilar to the fox trot of a Southern riding horse, alertly looking

from side to side. Back of him the wide sea of other longhorns showed, tossing in the dust. It might all have been some circus caravan, so wholly out of human experience it all seemed to the observers.

At the points of the herd rode two stalwart men, one at either side, men who never looked at one another. Back of them at long intervals, every four or five hundred cattle, came the swing men; and at last the dust of the drag—the weak, the maimed and the halt. Back of these yet again showed the darker colors of the remuda—some scores of horses easily handled by a ragged, thin-shouldered, tallow-faced boy, who wore the only pair of *chaparajos* in the company, for sake of trousers no longer fit to see.

In all their lives these Texas cattle never had seen a town even so great as embryonic Abilene. It took a quarter of an hour to get them to enter the cross street. As McCoyne had admitted that the new corrals would hold only a fraction of the cattle, it was the new intention to drive through the town and hold the herd a mile or two to the north; Nabours himself assenting thus much to the idea of a triumphal entry merely to oblige his guide. He rode back to the lead cart and leaned over.

"For God's sake, Miss Taisie, get on Blancocito and ride in front, why don't you? Get on your own horse and ride in front of your own cows."

But Taisie was not for triumphal entry. She stood out for closed curtains on her cart. Through a narrow crack she gazed out. There were countless men, but not a single woman.

Once headed for the cross street and crowned up by

the riders, the head of the herd, with much clacking of horns and cracking of hoofs, advanced until it came opposite the gallery of the Drovers' Cottage. Now came climax in welcome. Here the town band of Abilene lay in ambush.

Came a sudden blare of brass—a cataclysmic thing in its results, generously intended and not lacking precedent in welcomes, but failing in all understanding of a herd of Texas cattle.

Probably each musician was playing the air which pleased him best. It made no difference. With one tremendous rush and roar the herd surged, broke, ran. The wildly rolling tails betokened one of the sharpest stampedes of the entire trail. Simultaneously the great majority of the saddle ponies began efforts to disencumber themselves of their riders, in whom they now apparently had lost all confidence. Had the population of Abilene sought a circus, they needed now no more than to look about them.

The band played on, as those having engaged in an undertaking which they did not like to discontinue. But they played on to an empty house. The Del Sol herd was gone!

The riders leaned once more into the work, headed by Nabours, profoundly cursing all brass bands, in a run the worst they had seen, even in their abundant experience. The men of Abilene had the first and finest opportunity of their lives to see a herd of wild Texas cattle handled as no men other than these could have done the work. Even for these it took time and distance.

The sudden burst of melody had left the cattle with-

out concertedness. They broke into different bands, even deserting their vanguard. Of the latter, old Alamo, the giant steer that had paced the herd for a thousand miles, alone held to the proper course. Alamo laid back his horns and raised his muzzle like some wild elk. He dashed past the mob, past the band at the Drovers' Cottage, past everything of Abilene except the railroad and the stockyards.

"Pore old Alamo!" said Jim Nabours later. "He shore knowed which way was north, but he didn't seem to know nothing else."

The head of old Alamo with its immense sweep of horns in later years long was known in the general freight office of a Western railroad, where, had he then retained his faculties, he might at every hour of the day and night have noted sight and sound of railway activities. But at the time then current, Alamo had never seen a bit of railroad iron in all his life. Perhaps to his startled gaze the two twisting lines of steel were two giant snakes. In any event, Alamo swerved suddenly, trying to evade them. His hard hoofs slipped on the metals and he fell. His right foreleg, doubled under him, snapped below the knee under his own weight and that of two other steers which had made bold to follow him. So there he lay, much like other figures in completed destiny.

Engaged in opposite directions, not many of the men of Abilene or of Del Sol noted what happened. There came out of the dust, spurring forward, only one slim ragged rider—who even had left his beloved horses—the boy Cinquo Centavos who, so it seemed,

had some sort of admiration and understanding of the lead steer of Del Sol.

Excited, tears streaming down his dusty face as always in his moments of tension, Cinquo spurred up to the railroad track and sprang down where the great steer lay struggling. His was the first rope that ever sang in Abilene streets. It caught the great steer over the horns and laid him flat, the pony setting back even as his rider left the saddle.

"Oh, Alamo!" wept Cinquo, seating himself on the steer's muzzle to quiet his plunging. "You done busted that laig plumb off!"

"Now, ain't that too bad!" said one of the more sober musicians, who now strolled over from the Drovers' Cottage.

"Here, you!" commanded Cinquo. "You go back to that cart where the nigger woman is at and get her to give you the hide of that yearlin' we killed yesterday.

"Gentlemen," continued Cinquo, drawing himself up to his full height, after he had the victim properly strung out, "this may be a cow town, but you-all don't know nothing about cows. Now look at that! Just because it's Fourth of July, you think you got any right to bust the best damn steer that ever come out of Texas?"

Alamo and Cinquo were to take the first curtain call. The boy was no theorist. Under his direction they brought him some pieces of barrel staves. Around these he wound again and again strips of the green hide, stretching it tight—perhaps the first surgery on a Texas steer, if not the last, ever known on the long trail up from the Southern lands.

"Rawhide," explained Cinquo to the gathering group, "is the holdin'est thing there is. Once that dries, that steer's laig will be a lot better'n new—if it don't dry too tight. Is them the pens over yon?" he continued. "Well, swing a pole acrost the sides of the chute. Some of you-all go and git some grass or hay. We'll make a belly-band o' the rest of the hide and swing him up offen the ground so it won't hurt his sore laig.

"This here steer's name is Alamo," he explained to his audience. "He's the onliest Texas cow or horse I ever knowed to have a name. But he started through. What us Texans starts we finishes. Git back now and leave me if he can stand up."

Old Alamo, relieved of rope and with no weight on his neck, proved his mettle by springing to his feet as though nothing had happened, and only the strange feeling in his foreleg prevented his charging the crowd as an evidence of good faith. But Cinquo impressed Sanchez, who was visible coming up, and Alamo yielded to the force of numbers and of skill. A man flung open the gate of the Abilene Stockyards. Alamo entered in.

"He's one game steer," said McCoyne, when later he found him there in place, in solitary grandeur. "If five hundred dollars will buy that steer he's mine right now, and I'll keep him as long as he lives. Hurrah for old Alamo, the first steer up the trail! Strike up some more music again, fellows; he can't get away now. Show my friends from Texas what a Fourth of July can be in Abilene."

But a certain thought came to the mind of Mr. McCoyne upon the instant.

"We've forgot about that young lady in the cart," said he. "Anyhow, she ain't stampeded. I told you we had a woman along, and now I'll prove it. Come on, men, march in front and play your damnedest. I'm going to fetch her up to the Cottage."

The landlord and manager of the Drovers' Cottage was an Eastern man imported for this special purpose of running a hostelry devoted to trail men, and now on his trial trip. His name—which so far as he is concerned is of no consequence—was Gore. His wife's name, which for years was of very great consequence in all Kansas, was Lou Gore. A portly woman she was, with a heart as large as that of any ox that ever came up the trail. Of Lou Gore's countless acts of charity, of her unceasing ministrations to the ill and the afflicted, the wounded and the improverished men of the old trail, history has written all too little. She was known sometimes as the Mother of Abilene, sometimes as the Mother of Kansas; more often as the Mother of the Cowboys.

As yet Lou Gore had small acquaintance of those mad scenes which so soon were to become a regular experience with her. But now the carpenters had her new hotel almost completed, nearly ready for occupancy. Somewhat flustered that she had not quite finished sweeping out after the carpenters, not quite put up all her curtains—for curtains she insisted upon at the cottage—the landlady of that edifice came to the front door in time to see some of the incidents above recorded. Therefore, duly, as she hid her hands under

her apron, she heard the reassembled musicians once more essaying sweet sounds, saw the procession of pedestrians advancing toward her door.

And then Lou Gore saw, after a second and more careful look, what she had not expected to see—a tall and beautiful young girl, an astonishingly and strikingly beautiful young girl, who now for the first time parted the curtains of her conveyance and sprang lightly to the ground.

Taisie Lockhart, in men's clothing—a thing then almost equivocal for a woman—stood looking about her as though about to fly. She seemed so much alone, so helpless, so appealing, that the only other real woman of Abilene ran to her and took her into her hospitable arms.

"Why, you poor dear!" said she. "You poor dear! You're a girl, ain't you! Of course, I knew! Now you come right on in!"

So Taisie Lockhart, the first woman ever to cross the doorstep of the Drovers' Cottage, with the exception of Lou Gore herself, came right on in. And as she passed the door and started toward the hall which opened from the front-office room she saw standing before her the man she had hoped and feared she would never see again—Dan McMasters.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE WOMAN

ON the flat prairie, whose solid turf offered good footing to the ponies, the Del Sol riders, cursing their luck, finished rounding up their stampeded cattle.

"I'm willing to admit there is such a place as Abilene now," grumbled Nabours, "but it ain't inhabitated by no human beings. This here idea of meeting a herd of cows with a brass band ain't no ways according to no kind of Hoyle."

"I ain't taking no more chances about going through town," he added. "We'll throw them around the town and stop about three mile north. Ef anybody wants to see them cows they've got to come out there to our camp, and not bring no brass band neither."

Wherefore, with exception of the few head already penned in the Abilene Stockyards, the Del Sol herd circumvented Abilene and all its attractions, and finally turned out on good grazing ground north of town. When at length the cattle were quiet and grazing the men pulled up with a feeling of vast relief, which each expressed in his own way.

"Well, boys," said the trail boss to those nearest him, "here's where we lean our saddles on the ground for a while. Tell Buck to pitch about here. The other cart'll likely stay in town."

It was the last camp at the end of the road, farthest north for any Texan longhorn at that hour. The long days and nights of trail work now were over.

Anita helped the cook to unload the cart which nominally was his, although he rarely had driven it. Strange and complex seemed the cargo as it was heaped up on the prairie. The three saddles of the lost men, their bridles and others; bed rolls and saddle blankets, kettles, pots and pans; ox yokes and trace chains; spurs, hair ropes and hide reatas; collapsed sacks of meal and flour and beans; some slabs of side meat, a mess box and a coffee mill, sections of several dried rawhides—all mingling with the meager war bags of a score of men. There were even a pair of horns of giant size, detached from the head of an aged steer whose neck had not proven able to withstand the pull of two reatas when it was attempted to haul him out of a quicksand crossing where he had bogged down. Len Hersey had chopped them off and put them in the cart, declaring that he wanted them for a "soo-vee-ner."

"We got all the comforts o' home now," remarked that insouciant soul as he rode by. "Maybe I kin trade them horns fer a shirt."

Nabours waited until he saw the cattle well scattered and disposed to feed, and until he saw the dust of the remuda coming in at a run, Cinquo Centavos and Sanchez by this time having completed their surgery on Alamo. He straightened in his saddle and drew tighter his belt, pushing his hat back on his furrowed forehead. Even now the burden of his responsibility was on his shoulders, and would be until the herd was

sold; and the proximity of town brought certain problems.

"Del"—he turned to his point man, whom he found seated on the ground engaged in wiping and reloading his revolver—"you ride on down to the hotel and tell Miss Taisie I want her to stay in town to-night at the hotel. She'll be safe with Milly along. The rest of us will come in when we can; maybe some to-night. This is the Fourth of July by the almanac, but there ain't going to be no Fourth of July so long as there is any chance of this here bunch of cows taking another run; and, of course, we can't tell just when we'll make any kind of sale."

Some of the men were disposed to grumble at the restriction of their range liberties, but the trail boss remained firm. Del Williams, quiet as usual, mounted and rode off toward town. He looked over his shoulder as he rode off alone toward the town, whose smoke was distinguishable across the prairies. Most of the other men were off at edges of the herd, all of them intent on gentling them down, with the exception of one.

Cal Dalhart knew that an agreed truce now had terminated. Up to this time both he and Williams had stood by their promise to let their quarrel wait until they had reached Abilene; and, truth to say, both scrupulously had refrained from word or act of hostility till now. But at the suspicion that his rival intended to forestall him, the pent-up wrath of Dalhart blazed high upon the instant. Without asking consent of any one he spurred out from his own place on the herd a quarter of a mile away. Nabours saw him, but

could not or did not attempt to call him back. He shook his head; a sense of impending trouble came to him.

"Who was that man rid off yan just now, boy?" Dalhart demanded of Buck the cook.

"Who dat? Why dat's Mister Del. He rid pint wif you all summer—you doan know him?"

Dalhart spurred off, but did not overtake his man outside the town limits. He saw Williams' horse standing with the reins down in front of the door of the Drovers' Cottage, near to Taisie's cart; a sight which filled him with rage. A few moments later he himself flung off and also entered.

Williams had found the office room empty. Hearing voices, as he thought on the floor above, he passed upstairs, ignorant of the ways of hotels and looking for some one who might tell him where he might find Miss Taisie Lockhart.

He exulted in the success of their experiment as though the herd were all his own. His eyes were filled with a glorious picture. In fancy he saw her triumphant, as though swimming upon a cloud, radiant, scarce touching the earth. He had seen her thus in camp a hundred times, himself standing apart, distant, hungrily regarding. No actual interview between them had taken place since they had left the home ranch of Del Sol. He never had declared himself actually, never had spoken a word of his love. She had seemed always a divinity too far off for his aspirations. But now he was about to see her. He swore now he would touch her hand, would stand face to face with her alone. The thought of this was too much for Del Williams. Suddenly he began to tremble in his fear

of her and his great and terrible love for her, as reverent and as loyal as any love man ever bore a woman. His courage left him. His limbs grew weak. Seeking a temporary truce with the situation, he turned into one of the little rooms which made off from the narrow hall and seated himself upon the bed, intending to pull himself together before he sought her further.

Dalhart, following up his quarry, also found the office empty. Hearing footfalls on the floor above, he also ran up the stair, looking for the man whom he knew to be somewhere in the house—the hotel was not yet really fully open for business. He found himself also in the upper hall, a long Marathon course between rows of doors all just alike, leading into rooms all just alike, all furnished just alike and each divided from the others by a shackling raw board partition, of ceiling loosely tongued and grooved. In each room was a single chair, a single washbowl, a single towel, a single bar of soap, a single coat hook on the back of the door. In each room sat a single bed, in each precisely at the same place—against the partition near the single window and facing the single door. Hotel making and hotel keeping still were in their infancy in Kansas.

Seeing no one in the hall, and still seeking for the sound he had heard, Dalhart, moody and blood mad—a more ruthless and dangerous man than Williams—entered one of these rooms to peer about. He found no one, flung himself down upon the bed. He leaned against the partition, causing it to rock somewhat.

Del Williams heard him but did not know who he was. He sat up, listening, his hand on his revolver,

for a situation of doubt was usually one of danger in that border country.

The two men now were but a few yards apart, though separated by three of the thin board partitions.

Dalhart called aloud, "You Williams! Where are you? You are hiding, you damned sneak! Come on out if you dare!"

Williams heard his call. He rose eagerly to meet the challenge, fear of any man unknown in his heart, his weapon in his hand ready to meet this man. A swift thought came to him that he had been riding hard, so that the caps on the cylinder tubes might have become disengaged. He pulled up the revolver and overran the cylinder rapidly to see that the piece was in perfect order, as now it needed to be.

Dalhart heard the movement somewhere beyond him. He stepped to his own door just as Williams was about to emerge at his. Then came a report. Immediately upon it came a grunt or groan, the fall of the body of a man upon the floor.

Del Williams was himself in a flash. He fully had intended to shoot Dalhart deliberately. Now he had shot him practically by accident. The barrel, which happened to be just at the level of the man's body as Williams whirled the cylinder, discharged the heavy ball as fatally as though by intent. The hammer must have been hit with his thumb. He never knew how it happened; no man ever does know how these things happen. The bullet pierced one partition after another. It had force enough left, driven by the heavy charge of

fine rifle powder, to penetrate also the chest wall of a man's body.

Dalhart fell, nor was it given to him to see the man who had killed him. If ever he heard the running feet of that man, or saw his glance cast into the room as he ran, no one ever could tell. He was dead the instant after the ball struck him.

A man met Williams in the front room, at the foot of the stair.

"What was that?" he demanded. "Who shot?"

Williams smiled.

"I reckon some fellow up there must have let off his gun by mistake. Maybe he has got too much liquor on board. Leave him go; he won't hurt nobody."

He passed out deliberately; deliberately gathered the reins of his horse; deliberately swung into the saddle and turned down the street.

Dan McMasters and Wild Bill Hickok, a block away, both had heard the sound of the shot and were walking toward the door.

"How are you, Del!" called McMasters. "I'm glad you got through all right."

Del Williams stopped, leaned over and shook hands with McMasters, whom he had not seen north of the Washita crossing.

"Why, everything's fine," said he. "We're holding the herd about three miles north. Come on out and see us. So long. I got to be going now."

He waved his hand, passed on at a gentle trot.

But Del Williams did not hold his trot. He did not ride to a saloon, neither did he swing northward out of town to join the herd. To the contrary, he jerked

his horse's head around to the south, sunk home the spurs and left town, heading south, as fast as a good cow horse could carry him.

Many men saw him cross the town of Abilene at speed, but a cowman on a running horse was no new sight on that busy day. Liquor was flowing at every bar. Del Williams, coatless, penniless, ragged, bearded, unkempt, not a dollar in a pocket and without a morsel of food, had no one to say him nay as he headed back down the long trail which just now had found its end. Plenty of men remembered how he looked. But no man, friend or stranger, ever looked on him again in that part of the world. He disappeared as though some quicksand had engulfed him.

So passed poor Del Williams, as good a cowman as ever crossed the Red River. Poor Del Williams, for after all he had not seen the face of the woman whom he adored, had not touched her hand, had never spoken to her a word of the love he had given her since his own boyhood. He knew that a murderer might never look into her face. True, he knew that the record of the shot, piercing the several partitions, would have been a perfect alibi as an accidental case of homicide. But he knew also that he had been a murderer in his heart. So he never looked into Taisie Lockhart's eyes and never touched her hand at all. And to this day no man knows what ever became of Del Williams, for no word ever came back from him. Perhaps he got into Old Mexico; perhaps he disappeared somewhere in the Indian Nations; perhaps he lived to old age and perhaps he did not live twenty-four hours.

Dan McMasters and Wild Bill Hickok, quasi officers

of the law, after their hurried investigation, looked one into the other's eyes and agreed that it would have been absolutely impossible for a man to kill another man in that way except by accident. In that case, and in Abilene at that time, there remained no need to question the killer or to pursue him. Neither of them asked or mentioned the name of the rider heading south, and if either had a suspicion, neither voiced it.

CHAPTER XL

MR. RUDABAUGH APPEARS

LEN Hersey, one of the swing men, condescended to converse with Cinquo Centavos, the fourteen-year-old horse herder. They sat their horses in the sunshine, watching the distant herd contentedly grazing. The wind was very soft and the sky very blue. Life would have been a pleasant thing for them both had they not been so close to town. They planned metropolitan conquest, both of them.

"I want to take a ride on the railroad kyars afore I go back home," resumed Cinquo. "If I didn't, my folks wouldn't think I wasn't much noways."

"Them kyars probably don't go nowheres near where you live at," replied Len. "I don't feel like taking no chances. Ef I am on a horse I'm all right; but ef a man's on the kyars, where is he?

"If you was in town what would you advise fer to buy first, Cinquo?" he continued.

"Some onions and some fried potatoes and pie first, I reckon," replied the boy. "Then some ammernition. Then maybe I'd get my hair cut. I had orter have some new pants. I mean ef I had any money."

"And then a shave?"

The boy blushed red.

"I reckon I can get shaves if I pay the man," said

he, "and I reckon I am going to have plenty of money afore long. What're you going to do?"

"Fust thing I am going to do when I get to town," replied Len, "I am going to get a drink."

"Then what?"

His companion gazed in deep thought.

"Then I think I'll get another drink. Fur as I can see now, that's about how I'm going to perceed. Of course, I may take both drinks at oncet. I can take other things under advisement, as the justice of the peace said. Maybe I would buy me a new pair pants; maybe I'd work around to the barber atter a while. When I got fixed up I might go and see what kind o' dancin' was in this town. Oh, yes! I did fergit about my shirt. I may buy me a shirt—ef there's any kind of monte played in Aberlene."

They both saw approaching across the prairies to the eastward a low-lying cloud of smoke. It was the first railroad train either of them had ever seen. They became very much excited.

"Look at her come!" said Cinquo. "Bet I ain't skeered to ride on that thing! Now you see!"

"You're a long ways off when you say it!" scoffed Len Hersey. "She's goin' to look a heap bigger and dangerouser, clost up. I bet we'd have to blindfold you and put two ropes on you afore we could put you on that there train, and then you'd be so skeered you'd shake your spurs off."

"I ain't got no more shakes than what you have," said the boy. "You ain't saw any more railroad kyars than what I have. But I don't reckon I'll go to town untel we sell our cows."

"Nor me," nodded Len. "But did you ever see such a town like this here one, now? They don't savvy dobe none, it seems like; they don't dry no mud; they just cut slabs of grass roots and build 'em up into a house, and put on a dirt roof. I looked inside of one as I rid by. It was lined with red caliker, walls and ceilings; no gypsum to white it up, nor nothing. Yet humans was livin' in it. They live in them dugouts, too—just push a hole back into a bank an' crawl in atter the hole like badgers. An' there ain't no trees; an' when they do have trees, hain't no moss on 'em. I ain't saw a cactus nowheres, an' as fer mesquite, I'm a notion to ride into one o' these plum thickets an' stick some plum thorns in my laigs, so's't a feller kin feel more nache'l."

Meantime the continuous shriek of the locomotive whistle had brought to the station practically the entire population of the city of Abilene. It was a great day—a trail herd and a railroad train all in one day.

From the four coaches which made up the train there now descended an astonishing number of men, comprising all sorts and conditions of humanity. Some obviously were Eastern, and as many bore the imprint of the border. All of them pushed on toward the head of the train. There was no station building. The Drovers' Cottage stood then for all of Abilene, and in that general direction the newcomers made their way. The ubiquitous McCoyne was first to greet them.

"Right this way, gentlemen!" said he. "Let me lead you to our hotel, the finest in the West. Welcome to Abilene, my friends! Yonder is the stockyards. I suppose some of you are looking after cattle. There is some in there now, and there is three thousand

more right north of town. If you're looking for cattle, we've got them and don't you never doubt it! Gentlemen, you certainly have come to the right place. Boys, where's the band?"

With some sort of instinct of his own McCoyne more especially addressed a quiet-looking sandy-bearded man in dark clothing, who seemed to be a man of distinct purposes and direct methods in life.

"How'd you like to ride out this evening and see our herd? They've just got in from Texas this morning."

The stranger made a noncommittal reply to the effect that he was hungry. The crowd of newcomers began to disintegrate. Men looked after their hand bags, their rifles. Picturesque, certainly, was the personnel of every westbound train in Kansas at that time, when the head of steel was but little beyond the boom town of Abilene, first cow camp of Kansas.

Hickok and McMasters stood near the door of the Drovers' Cottage, looking at the stirring and curious scene before them. The man of the Northern border was quiet after his fashion, moody. He turned suddenly to Dan McMasters.

"Look at them come!" he said. "Next year they'll be here in thousands; and there'll be cattle here in thousands too."

McMasters nodded. The older man went on:

"Let me give you some advice. There is going to be big money in raising and selling cattle right up in this country; more money than there will be in trailing them north and selling at the road. If you'll listen to me, you'll get some land of your own up here. I'll tell you where you can get a ranch, and a good one, over on the

Smoky Hill, with all outdoors for your pasture. Put some cows on there. They'll get fatter here than they ever will in Texas, though you don't believe it. I've seen cattle up here, around the Army posts—and fat too. There's no money in selling thin cattle. You'll find that out if you keep at it. I've lived up here, north of the tick line, longer than you have."

McMasters nodded.

"I've been studying this country now for quite a while," said he. "I've seen some wintered cattle up in here, and as you say they were heavier. There's a lot to be learned by Texas men. They don't know that there is any world north of thirty-six. They're still fighting the war, down in my state."

"Huh! Well, this trial outlet for your cattle'll end the war quicker than all your speech makers ever will.

"Of course," he continued, "if you settle down to ranching you've got to get married some time. It's a hard life for a woman here on the front, with the Indians not so far away. They tell me you have brought a young woman up here with this herd. I haven't seen her. Lou Gore took her in charge and I'll bet she'll keep her close. She's young? She can ride? Why don't you marry her and settle down up here?"

He laughed at his conceit.

"You can bring up cattle from below as fast as you need more stock. Marry and settle down, son, and go into the sheriff business up here. I'll give you my recommendation that you're the best pistol shot I ever saw, unless it's myself, and I'm not any too damn sure of that last.

"I'd bring Agnes out here if I was in a little different line of work myself," he added. "That's my wife."

No man ever heard him speak in other but terms of gentleness of the woman who had married him, knowing what he was.

"I have got to finish my work first before I can settle down," said Dan McMasters, almost as sad and moody as his companion here—indeed, singularly like to him.

Suddenly he touched the arm of Wild Bill, spoke in a low voice.

"Look!" said he. "Don't move! There's our man! That's Rudabaugh down there by the last car! So that's the way he took to get here!"

"Yes," smiled Hickok, only amusement on his face. "He's got here too late to stop that herd from making Abilene."

"Yes; but he got here at just the right time, for all that!"

McMasters' face was cold. The mask of expressionlessness again was covering it. His eyes, narrow, the skin of the upper eyelids drawn triangularly down, never left the man for whom so long and patiently he had been waiting.

CHAPTER XLI

EASTERN CAPITAL

THE passengers who descended from the train left the coaches nearly empty. The head of steel was to the westward and new towns were projected for thirty miles; but the greater fame of Abilene, the city of the future stockyards, capital of a coming cow trade, still acted as magnet for a majority of the traders and buyers, adventurers, hunters, all the curious-minded gentry then eagerly exploiting a West which never yet had lived. The rumors of northern drives of Texas cattle had in some way gone abroad; this first arrival was a news event of the first water.

Before these arrivals now spread the vastest, sweetest empire that ever fell to gaze of any adventurers of new fortunes. The very feel of it was in the warm but vital air that blew across the waving prairies; lay in the far horizon that swept untarnished by any settler's smoke, far as the eye might reach. The flowers here also had not yet known a bee and there was not a weed. At times the edge of the buffalo grass was east of the Western border. The bluestem had not yet fully got to Abilene. The buffalo that year moved a little farther west. Their wallows dotted the surface

of the earth thereabout for years to come. The great checkerboard of the gods, four vast spaces in the corners of the greatest crossroads of the world, still lay out as the Range—mesquite and grama in the Southwest, bunch grass and buffalo grass in the Northwest; native—and later bluestem—grasses in the Northeast; redtop and its fellows in the Southeast; all lapping, encroaching, passing, augmenting as the swift years altered the range. From Spanish-moss lands to the sagebrush steppes, from the scant grama to the waist-high green, lay the country of the cows. At that time it was but imperfectly known. The original, the aboriginal titles had not yet been extinguished.

The raw little village of itself meant not so much to most of these men, who had seen such villages before, east of the Missouri. The scanty edifices were accepted at least as sufficient. There were saloons, stores, a hotel. The travelers looked to their weapons and their luggage, and then, each after his own fashion, headed out toward the signs which made offerings to civilized man. Most went to the saloons a few moved toward the Drovers' Cottage, where even now, before her formal opening, Lou Gore was making mankind comfortable on the frontier. Others wandered up and down the street, gazing this way or that. None passed the corrals of the Abilene Stockyards without a curious gaze at the gaunt, long-haired creatures which now marked a renaissance of the entire cattle trade in America. It all was crude, young, new and unspeakably alluring—this strange new world, offspring of time and the whim of the immortal gods at play on their great four-squared checkerboard.

McMasters called Hickok aside, spoke to him quietly, after a time.

"Our men have gone over to the new saloon," said he. "I see one is headed for the Twin Livery Barn. They've probably got horses there, or are looking for some."

"Well," said Hickok, "you know them best. They haven't made any break yet and I've got nothing on them. None of them ever harmed me. What's the game?"

"I want you to watch them for a little while," replied McMasters. "I'll not leave much to you except the watching. I'll be with you very soon. Just now I want to find out what's going to be done about the sale of this herd. McCoyne has got some man in tow; and yon's Nabours, the Del Sol trail boss—he's just come in. I think I ought to know what goes on there."

McCoyne, the exuberant and irresistible prophet of Abilene, indeed now was bringing forward a stranger, a bearded, stocky, self-contained man of nondescript dress, yet rather of Western look himself. The three little groups now joined.

"Mr. McMasters," begun McCoyne, "and you, too, Mr. Nabours, and Marshal Hickok, this, now, is Mr. Pattison, just come to town. He's in the market to buy some range stuff. He's been in the packing business in Indianapolis for several years, and he has just come out to Junction City, a couple of hours over east, to start a packing plant of his own out here; though I don't see why he didn't pick on Abilene for that. Anyhow he has to come here for his cattle."

"Good morning, gentlemen," said the stranger thus

introduced, smiling humorously. "I am glad to meet you. Yes, I am looking for some cattle. I don't know how you guessed it."

"Where'd you want them delivered?" inquired Jim Nabours, coming to the thing on his own mind. "We got some cows. I can testify they're good travelers."

"Well, not far," replied Pattison. "That some of your cattle over in the pens? Junction City is just over here a couple of days' march. I am going to try to pack a few cattle in there this year. I shouldn't wonder if we started some stockyards in Kansas City before long. My friend, old Mitch, has been talking of it a long time. If they get the yards it won't be long until a packing house is started there. That would save a lot of distance in shipping East.

"I know that two Milwaukee and Chicago men—Plankinton is the name of one and Armour, I think, is the other man—well, they are figuring on going into the packing-house business in Kansas City. They've got a man out there now, looking things over."

"Then where does it leave you at Junction City?" demanded McCoyne.

Pattison spread out his hands with a shrug.

"Of course, their man is crazy. He's talking of using a hundred thousand cattle every year. I shouldn't wonder if they did put down half that many. All this Western country is going to take a mighty jump since the railroad has gone West. That's why I am here, of course. I've come out to look over this whole business myself. If it's all the same to you I'd like to look over your herd. Mr. McCoyne says it isn't far out to where you are holding it."

"How'd right now do?" asked Nabours calmly. "How much time do you want to look over our cows? With me it's sharp's the word and quick's the motion."

"About five minutes. I've seen your sample in the corrals here. How much a pound do you figure you ought to get?"

"How much a pound? I don't know nothing about that. I don't know how much a cow weighs."

"Well, I can tell you. One of your sample steers will weigh about nine hundred pounds. They look like greyhounds crossed on a window shutter. Two cents a pound would be a lot for them. Now, a fat steer will weigh twelve hundred instead of nine hundred, and he'll bring four cents instead of two. Say I give you eighteen dollars for your lean steers, right off the trail. I could give you thirty-six dollars if they was fat; say if they'd been wintered up here and fed north."

"Mister," said Jim Nabours, "you're talking foolish, though pleasing. I don't know how much nine hundred pounds is, nor twelve hundred pounds; but when you tell me any Texas steer is worth more than thirty dollars you make me think you ain't got no money to buy nothing. You don't mean to say that in the presence of witnesses?"

"I certainly do mean to say it," rejoined Pattison. "But that isn't all. Your Texas steers will bring a good deal more than thirty dollars when you have taken time to move them up north of the edge of winter and ranged them and fattened them and bred the horns off of them. That can all be done in five years."

"I ain't got no five years," said Jim Nabours. "You allowed five minutes will do. Well, let's climb on top

our broncs and ride out and see; it's only about two miles or so north.

"Come on, Dan." He turned towards McMasters. "Ride along with us. I rely some on your judgment."

McMasters turned toward Hickok with a quiet word or so, and waving his hand strolled off to pick up his own horse. McCoyne, anxious as he was to see a trade effected, did not dare forsake the city of Abilene at so critical a time. The newly christened Lone Star was full. Besides, he was mayor of the town.

"Bill," said he, accosting Hickok, "I got you here now, and I'm going to have you elected town marshal. We can't hold any election right now, and we may need a town marshal right soon. I appoint you marshal right now, and Mr. McMasters as your deputy."

Hickok looked at him lazily and smiled.

CHAPTER XLII

TWENTY STRAIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE

THE great herd, scattered over a mile of grazing ground, by now was well quieted. Wearied by their own exertions, some of the animals were lying down, as though aware that the end of their journey was at hand; the remainder scattered, grazing contentedly. Men were on guard here and there at the edges of the herd; others were at the fire, eating. A sudden excitement arose among the cow hands when word passed that a buyer was on the scene, for so they interpreted the advent of Nabours and his companions. Nabours waved a hand with genuine cowman enthusiasm.

"Look at them!" he exclaimed. "Did you ever see a finer outfit of cows in your borned days, Mr. Pattison?"

The face of the trader remained expressionless, though his eyes were busy as he rode.

"You've got some she-stock in here," said he at length; "some yearlings in too. I should say, too, that you've got several sorts of brands."

"Well, maybe we have," said Nabours. "I'd have a damned sight more if we had not hit so much country where there wasn't no cows coming north. This here herd belongs to a orphant, Mr. Pattison, and in our

country they ain't no questions asked about orphants; the law of brands don't run on orphants. We put up this herd in our own country. Our road brand is a Fishhook, and when you buy a Fishhook steer you are buying our support of the brand—twenty good men that can shoot. I got to sell these cows straight too."

Pattison reined up, still dubious.

"Let me tell you something. I know beef—that's my trade. You've got maybe three or four hundred of light stuff and shes. They don't pack well. Still, here I am with a good ranch over on the Smoky Hill. It hasn't got a head of stock on it yet.

"I just took in the land and water and trusted to God for the cattle. I know where the real money is, and it isn't in buying lean fours. If I had any way to handle these stockers over on my ranch I'd take your herd straight."

"I can't split no cows," said Jim Nabours. "It's all or none. I got to sell all these cows afore dark. We both allowed that five minutes was plenty."

"Well, it is," said Pattison quietly. "I trade as quick as anybody, and I don't go to the saloon first, as two or three other men have, whom I happen to know, that came on that train. Now I'll tell you what I'll do: If you'll hold out that stuff below the fours I'll give you twenty straight for your fours, right here on the prairie. Five thousand cash down, balance in draft on the First National of Kansas City."

Suddenly Dan McMasters turned to Nabours.

"The herd is sold," said he. "Twenty a head, straight through."

"How do you mean, Dan?"

"I am taking all the she-stuff and stockers for myself. Let Mr. Pattison have the fours."

"But what're you going to do?"

"I am thinking of starting a Northern ranch for myself. It don't take me long to decide either. I believe Mr. Pattison is right. There's where the money is. Besides, I'm leaving Texas before long."

Pattison turned toward him with his quizzical smile, estimating him after his own fashion.

"You bid me up, young man," said he; "but you've sold this herd, yearlings and all, at twenty straight on the prairie.

"Now, we've got plenty time left—two minutes by the watch. I'll give you just a minute and a half to think of me as your partner in my ranch on the Smoky Hill, myself to own half this stuff you've just bought in, you to trail a fresh herd up to us next year and to run this upper ranch for me—all dependent on your investigation of me back East, preferably by telegraph to-night. I've got the land, you've got the cows.

"I'll show you how to get three-four-five cents a pound for beef on the hoof. What do you say?"

McMasters turned his own cool gray eyes upon the other, regarding him with a like smile as their eyes met, and their hands.

"We have traded," said he quietly.

Nabours looked from one to the other, scratching his head.

"Then is my cows sold?" he demanded. "Do we get twenty straight?"

"You heard us," said Pattison. "There is a new

company on the new northern range—the PM brand. Mr. McMasters is my partner; you see, I know something about him already. And I want to say to you, sir, you are on the road to more money than you could ever make in Texas. We'll cut this stuff and tally out to-morrow if it pleases you. Come on over to the fire, partner; let's light down."

Each in his mood, Nabours somewhat chastened as he endeavored to figure out how much the five minutes' work had meant to him, they moved to where the giant cart of Buck the cook loomed on the level prairie. Pattison reached into the pocket of his coat and drew out a great package of folded bills, which he tossed on the ground before him as he reached for his coffee cup.

"I think that's five thousand dollars," said he. "I can't carry much cash with me, of course. In town, I'll give you a draft on the First National of Kansas City for fifty-five thousand more if the herd tallies out three thousand head. I am almost ready to take your own tally."

"No," said Jim Nabours, "we haven't tallied out since the last run; I been scared to. If we hadn't had no bad luck down the trail there wouldn't 'a' been money enough in Kansas City to buy all them cows we started with. Do you mean to say to me that you're going to give me sixty thousand dollars for them cows?"

"I certainly am if you don't object too much about it. And I call this a good day's work. I have bought the first northern-trail herd. Besides, I have got a partner and a manager for my ranch, and a line of

supply for the ranch, too. Yes, I call it a good five minutes' work.

"You shall have all the time you want to put up your half for these stockers, Mr. McMasters," he added.

"I don't want any time," replied Dan McMasters. "I can raise a little money. You see, I know the history of this herd. I'd almost have been ready to buy it straight through at twenty a head myself."

"I was afraid you would," said Pattison. "But I wanted the cows and a partner too. All right, take your pleasure as to your half of the northern ranch ante. I tell you, I am going to make you more money than either of us ever made in our lives. Lord, this is just the beginning of things! What a fine world it is out here!"

He turned to the others as he went on, tin cup of coffee in hand.

"You see, I am banking on two things that you Texas men didn't know anything about. One is the stockyards at Kansas City. The other is a packing business in Kansas City. There's going to be the market for this range stuff. Meantime I'll have to get some of your boys to drive these fours over to Junction City for me. I'll buy all your ponies except what you need to get back home. My partner and I will need some horses for the PM outfit on the Smoky Hill.

"Oh, I don't blame you for not seeing the game very far ahead up here," he went on. "This is a colder country than you are used to. But if I can hire some of your men to run the herd for us, they can build dugouts in a few days like those you saw in town,

and hole up warm and snug for the winter. After a while you'll begin to make hay, but you'll need a whole lot less than you think right now.

"We are going to start the first winter ranch on the heels of the first herd north of thirty-six. I am going to show you that cows will do a heap better when you fatten them north of the edge of winter and north of the tick line.

"Is our five minutes up? I don't like to waste time here. Let's go back to town."

"When do we deliver, then?" asked Nabours.

"You've sold and delivered right now and right here, on the prairie," replied Pattison. "I am hiring all the men that will go in with Mr. McMasters and me; we'd like at least six or eight. Mr. McMasters will come out to help tally to-morrow if that suits you. I never knew a Texas cowman to falsify a count, and I never knew one that didn't go broke trying to pack his own cattle. It takes big men to do big business, and you will have to pardon me if I say it never was in the cards to pack cattle in Texas, by Texas or for Texas. The South needs the North in this thing. It's going to take both the North and the South to make this country out here." He swept a wide arm. "The West! Oh, by golly!"

"Well," sighed Jim Nabours, still unable to credit his sudden good fortune, "my boss is the richest girl in Texas right now, if she was in Texas. I'll have to admit she owes part to a damn Yankee, same as part to us Texans."

He turned earnestly to the Northern trader.

"You've got to see our boss when you get in town," said he. "You'll be glad to see where all your money went to. She shore is prettier than a spotted pup."

"Well, let's ride," laughed Pattison. "We'll have a look at Abilene and the Texas orphan."

"On our way!" said Nabours, and they mounted. Nabours rode off to accost one of his men. "We've sold the herd, Len," said he. "I'll pay off to-morrow in town. All you fellows that wants to hire out to these folks can do it. You split the men to-night, Len, and half of you come to town if you feel like it.

"Oh, yes," he added, turning, as he started off, "I forgot to tell you. I forgot to tell you that Cal Dalhart got killed in town a little while ago. I heard it just when I left. Del Williams done shot him, looks like."

"The hell he did!" remarked Hersey. "Well, it was plain enough the last three months they had it in for each other—both allowing to marry Miss Taisie."

"And now they won't neither of them will," nodded Nabours. "Ain't it hell how men fuss over a woman? Now Del's gone somewheres. Both good cow hands as ever rid. That's the fourth man I've lost since we left home, not mentioning several hundred cows. I'm the onluckiest man in the world.

"Yet," he went on as he joined McMasters and Pattison, addressing the former, "I call this a good day's work. We've brung our brand through, and we've done sold her out. I reckon Mr. Sim Rudabaugh has played in hard luck. He didn't keep us out of Aberlene, now did he?"

"He did his best," replied Dan McMasters. "He got here just a little too late. He came to town on the

train just a little while ago. There are two or three of his men here already, maybe more."

Nabours looked at him narrowly, suddenly serious.

"Some of us boys'll be in town to-night," said he.

As they rode by the jumbled heap of the camp-cart goods a very exact observer might have noted that the pair of wide horns carefully cherished by Len Hersey had disappeared since the first passing of the group from town. No one had particularly noticed Len as he rode up near the cart with a stubborn little yearling dogy on his rope; it was thought the cook had requisitioned beef. But now, as the party turned to leave the herd, the keen eye of Pattison caught sight of an astonishing creature, scarce larger than a calf, but bearing so enormous a spread of horns as would have graced any immemorial steer of the Rio Grande.

"My Lord!" he exclaimed. "What on earth is that? Is that the way cattle grow down in your country?"

"Yes, sir," replied Len gravely, still holding the animal on his reata. "He's a nice little yearling. Give him time, an' he'll raise right smart o' horn. O' course, he's still young. Texas, she sort of runs to horn, in some spots, special seems like."

"Spots? Spots? What spots?" demanded Pattison. "Where'd that critter come from?"

"He come from our range, sir," replied Len. "He range over with a bunch near the Laguna Del Sol. They all watered in there, at the Laguna. Near's we could tell there must be something in the water in the Laguna sort of makes the cows in there run to horn, like."

"Well, I should say so! But still, you can't make me

believe that any steer less than a four could ever grow horns like that."

"Oh, yes, they kin," rejoined this artless child of the range. "My pap used to drive down to Rockport, on the coast—I've helped drive south, to ship cows on the Plant steamers. I reckon they was going to Cuby. We had to rope every steer and throw him down and take a ax and chop off his horns, they was so wide. That was to give more room on the boats. Some steers didn't like to have their horns chopped off thataway. Well, here we got plenty of room for horns anyhow." He swept an arm over the field of waving grass reaching on to the blue horizon. "Give me three years more on this dogy and I promise you he'll have horns.

"Speaking of horns, Jim," he resumed; "oncet when we were driving in a coast drive we turned in a lot of dogies, of course claimin' a cow was a cow, an' nache'l, four years old even if it was only a yearling. Well, the damn Yankee who was buying our cows he kicked on so many dogies. Of course, none of us fellers'd ever heard of a thing like that; a buyer allus taken the run o' the delivery, head for head. Says he, 'I ain't buyin' yearlin's, I'm buyin' fours.'

"Well, we driv in another dogy right then, one of them Lagunies, an' he had horns big as this one here. The damn little fool he put on more airs than any Uvalde mossy horn about his headworks. It was just like he said, 'Look at me! I done riz these here horns in one year, where it taken you maybe a hunderd.' Cows was their pride, mister, same as us. Uh-huh.

"But do you believe me? That damn Yankee wouldn't take my word that the horns of them Lagunies

gets their growth early sometimes. I says, 'Mister, I'll bet you a hunderd dollars that's a four.' 'Well, maybe it is,' says he. He scratch his haid. But he couldn't git over it. When we come to load in at the boat he says, 'Well I be damned ef that ain't the littlest cow I ever seen fer a four.' I was sort o' hot by then, and I says, 'Boss, you're right—that ain't a four, it's a yearlin'.'

"Well, then he swung around the other way. Says he, 'It kain't noways be a yearlin', not with them horns. I bought too many cows not to know that much. It don't stand to reason that no yearlin' can raise no horns more'n five foot acrost.' You see, mister, that yearlin' was carryin' horns about like this one—one of our Lagunies. O' course, I don't say that all Texas cows has horns like that as yearlin's; you can see that fer yore own self right here. Only way we could convince that gentleman was to show him."

"Well, that may all be," said Pattison, nettled. "Anyhow, I always take my own judgment in cattle, ages and all. I've known buyers who couldn't tell long twos from threes. I've studied cattle."

"I never did much," said Len Hersey; "I never had time. But my folks couldn't never break me of gamblin' —monte, you know. Sometimes I win a shirt, and then agin I'd lose one. Right now"—he looked ruefully at his elbow—"I'd like fer to win one. I'll gamble that critter's a yearlin', now. I'd hate to take a man's money on a cinch; but ef you, now, was feelin' you'd like to peel off a couple of hunderd against my hawse an' saddle, an' what's left of my shirt, why, I'd hate

to rob you—I'd bet that that's a yearlin'. I was goin' to kill it fer beef. We don't eat the horns, mister, but them Lagunies is special tender on account of that something in the water around there."

"You fool Texans deserve to be trimmed," said Pattison; "a boy like you putting your judgment up against that of one of the oldest buyers that ever saw Kansas City."

"I know it—I know I'm foolish," nodded Len Hersey. "I was borned thataway. I allus hatter be bettin' on monte er somethin'. Still I'll bet thataway on this here yearlin' ef you insist. Does you?"

"I certainly do, just to teach you a lesson. Here, Mr. Nabours"—he pulled out his roll of bills once more —"take this couple hundred, against this man's horse and saddle. You be the judge. He bets that's a yearling. That suit you?" He turned to Len Hersey, who still was holding the mooted animal on his reata.

"Yes, all right," humbly replied that youth.

"Throw him, Len," commanded Nabours; "then we'll all look him over and decide." He was as solemn as his man.

Len sunk a spur and with a leap his pony crossed in front of the quarry, swept its feet from under it. It was thrown with such violence that one of its horns was knocked off and lay entirely free on the grass. Jim Nabours, dismounting, gravely held up the remaining horn, easily detachable from the normal stubby yearling growth on the dogy's head. He looked at Pattison dubiously, none too sure how he would take this range jest. But the Northern man was a sportsman. He

broke into a roar of laughter, which for hours he renewed whenever the thought again came to his mind.[1]

"Give him his money, Nabours," said he. "He's won it fair and I've had a lesson, and when your boys come to town the treat's on me. Keep those horns for me," he added. "If I don't sell old Mitch or young Phil Armour at Kansas City with those horns I'll eat them both!" Again he went off into gusty laughter, in which all could join.

"Sho, now," said Len Hersey. "Now look at that! He must of got his horns jarred loose, like, in some night run in the timber. I've knowed that to happen."

"Len," commanded Nabours, "I don't want no more of this damned foolishness. Here's ten dollars, and that's enough to buy you a shirt, and I want to see you do it. He'll only play the rest at monte or faro or something," turning to Pattison.

"No, give it all to him," the latter rejoined. "It's his. Let him play it. I've done as much myself when I was younger. And monte's a cinch compared to buying and packing and shipping cattle to the East."

They turned and rode toward town, young in the youth of the open range, where to-morrow did not yet loom.

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[1] The foundation of this anecdote is to be found in Saunder's *Trail Drivers of Texas.*

CHAPTER XLIII

LOU GORE

"COME right on in, you poor child." When Taisie Lockhart first had climbed down from the lofty cart seat and approached the front door of the Drovers' Cottage, she walked straight into the arms of sturdy Lou Gore, matron of the first cowman's hotel of the North and Florence Nightingale of the frontier. That good soul took the girl to her bosom, patting her shoulder like a mother. "My!" she exclaimed. "To think at first I might have took you for a boy!"

When they entered the door she felt her young charge wince, draw back. A tall young man stood in the office near the door. It seemed to Lou Gore that these two must somewhere have met, although she scarce heard the voice of either now as they saluted, acknowledged.

"Why, you knew that gentleman?" she asked later.

"Yes," said Taisie; "he was once a neighbor of ours down in Texas. He was with us part way on the trail."

"Oh-ho! Well, he don't seem so very neighborly now, up here. He don't talk to nobody except Wild Bill. Them two were shooting at a mark over on the street. My husband says neither of them didn't miss. My dear, don't never have anything to do with a man

who is a shooter—take my advice. Men is bad, and shooters is worst.

"But now you come on in with me, child; I've got to take care of you. Law me, is this all the clothes you got—and this the Fourth of July?"

"Yes"—Taisie turned on her the gaze of her troubled eyes—"it's all I've got. I am poor—unless we sell the cows. In Texas no one has anything but cows."

"Well, you ain't poor if them's your cows. You'll sell 'em all right. Everybody's howling for cattle right now.

"But come back into my kitchen, my dear, and I'll fix you up. Who is that hollering out in front?"

"Oh, that's Milly, my black woman," said Taisie. "She's out in the cart. Wait, I'll go get her." And presently she returned with Milly, in one hand carrying her long-barreled weapon.

"Miss Taisie, Ah cross my ha'ht," said she. "Ah'm sho' Ah done seen dat no-'count nigger man o' mine right down the street. If he ever do come a leetle bit closter I gwine to blow the lights outen him. Ah sho' is!"

"Law sakes!" remarked Lou Gore. "How you talk! Set that gun down and come on and help me get this lady fixed up. If I only had a change of clothes for her," she added, finger at lip, dubiously regarding Taisie's male apparel. "We don't fit each other."

"Change of clothes, ma'am!" exclaimed Milly. "In her trunk out in the kyart she got all kind of clothes!"

"My mother's wedding clothes!" Taisie smiled sadly. "I brought them along because I had no place to leave them. My own are all worn out."

"Well, that's all right, my dear. We got to fix you up a little first, you're so dusty. I reckon my big dish-pan will do. You'd think they'd have washtubs over at the store, but they haven't; not one. There ain't a bathtub in the whole state of Kansas, and never was. Plenty of shooting, but mighty little washing."

She pushed Taisie down into a kitchen chair and tenderly removed her broad-brimmed hat. Thus was revealed the heavy queue of hair that lay down the girl's neck and shoulders.

"Did you ever!" exclaimed Lou Gore. "Lemme cut that string off." Her scissors were at her belt; a snip or two, a shake, a running through of her fingers, and the glorious flood of Anastasie Lockhart's tresses fell about her as she sat, a Godiva in a cotton shirt.

"I am going to take off that shirt, my dear," said Lou Gore, and leaned Taisie's head against her own bosom. She caught the garment by the lower edge and left the girl sitting, tousled, her arms now huddled to her.

"My Lord, my dear," exclaimed Lou Gore, "you're a beauty! You don't belong here. And wedding clothes? You say you've got wedding clothes out in the cart? You'll need them. Look at that hair! My dear, how do you make it curl up on the end that way?"

It was Milly who explained: "It just quoil up on de fur end dat way nacherl. She got more hair den ary lady in Texas."

Lou Gore stood back and looked at Taisie once more.

"My dear," said she, "you are a beauty! What's more, you are good. Give me a hour or two with you

fixed up in woman clothes and I'll marry you to any man you'll point out to me."

"In her trunk, I done told you," interrupted Milly, "she got all kind o' clothes; all silk—pink an' blue an' everything. Her maw had the pertiest clothes in Texas. She brung her clothes out from N'Awlins. You-all knows quality, ma'am."

Lou Gore pursed a lip.

"Well, we'll get the trunk in," said she. "Now, child, you go into my room there and lay down until I get the water het. You're that nervous, you jump when you see a young man standing around."

Taisie Lockhart, clinging to Lou Gore's hand, flung herself upon the white bed, the flame of her hair all about her shoulders, concealing her face. She began to sob indeed, utterly unnerved. Lou Gore understood this to be the fatigue of a thousand miles.

She must have slept. It seemed hours later that she was awakened by what seemed to be the sound of a door slammed shut. A few moments later came the sudden sound of a horse galloping. That was Del Williams, passing out of town.

Lou Gore heard the arrival of the railway train, saw men passing from the train. When she met Hickok and McMasters at the foot of the stair they told her what she would see if she went upstairs. But to the sturdy soul of Lou Gore hysterics were unknown. She did go upstairs, did make a certain discovery, did perform certain offices for the first man in Abilene to pass with his boots on. Then, whether in care of Abilene's reputation or out of kindness for her sleeping guest, she did not open the door of Taisie's room

to tell her what had happened. Well, a man was dead. There would be others. Lou Gore sighed, her great hands wrapped in her apron.

"Milly," said she at length to the black woman, whom she found in the kitchen, "you come help me get supper. It takes an awful lot of fried mush. And these men keep coming here, though I ain't got this hotel really opened yet."

When the party from the herd jogged into town the first man they met was McCoyne, and now he had news of his own.

"Wild Bill told me about the little trouble upstairs." He nodded toward the Drovers' Cottage. "One man seems to have left town. I didn't want anybody to think we've got a tough town here. Fact is we haven't got any courthouse or coroner or anything. We've got to hold an organization meeting and get these things fixed up before long. I just got a couple of men that was standing out near the door to go over and dig a good grave on the hill yonder; you can see it from here. First grave in Abilene, July 4, 1867. Well, Mr. Nabours, they buried your man fine; they fixed up some sort of a box for a coffin. I seen them two carry him over to the hill all right. I declare, I don't believe there is a coffin in this whole town—our storekeepers is that negligent, got that poor a notion of goods. Now think of my getting so busy, forgetting to have our merchants order plenty of coffins! I don't want Abilene to be back of no town in Kansas. You understand, in the hurry of getting things started, gentlemen, a man's liable to overlook a lot of things."

They informed McCoyne of the sale of the Del Sol herd. He shook each by the hand effusively.

"Didn't I tell you"—to Nabours—"didn't I say you'd find buyers up here in Abilene? Sold out, the first day you hit town! Sold out at twenty straight right through! More money than you ever seen before!"

"That ain't no dream," said Jim Nabours, taking a chew of tobacco. "Say, Mr. Pattison, you couldn't raise some silver money, could you? This paper money is all right, of course; and if Dan McMasters says so, that paper on the bank is all right and it goes too. But silver is the only money that's money in Texas. I don't reckon my men would take any other kind, and I know old Sanchez wouldn't. You can't pay no Mexican nothing but silver."

"You don't need very much money," smiled McMasters. "But, Jim, did you ever stop to figure how much money you'd have if you got it all in silver?"

"Why, no, I don't reckon I ever did."

"Well, a thousand dollars in silver weighs about sixty-three pounds—somewhere in there. Now, sixty times sixty is thirty-six hundred, isn't it? You'd have pretty near two tons of money. You'd have to load a cart to get it home. If the Comanches didn't get it, it'd sink any wagon you tried to ford."

"My Lord!" said Jim Nabours. "My good Lord! Look what we escaped, coming North! Tell me, has Miss Taisie got that much money now?"

"She certainly has if she gets it all in silver," smiled Pattison. "You begin to see what banks are good for?"

"By gum!" exclaimed McCoyne, slapping his thigh. "We certainly have got to have a bank in Abilene, right

off! Anyhow, for looks we've got to have a church and a school; but a bank is almost as useful as a livery barn."

"I'll see what can be done about that when I get back to Kansas City," said Pattison. "I'd not be surprised to see a million cattle come up the trail in the next two seasons. Think of the silver it would take to pay for them!"

"Mister," said Jim Nabours, in a very genuine mental distress, "how much silver money would a million cows come to at twenty straight—I mean how many pounds?"

"So much that pretty soon we'll have to have banks at both ends of the Texas trail," said Pattison quietly. "So much that before long we'll have to have railroads north and south instead of trails. So much that before long there'll be a dozen towns instead of one handling the cattle coming North. So much that all this country north and west of here is going to be settled with people—farms, towns, railroads. Trail makers? The first trail maker of the world was a cow!"

He dropped his chin for an instant in thought.

"And the men who'll be in on that," he added presently, "are the ones who can see it now and not after a while. My new partner and I can see it now. We traded quick. I always trade fast or not at all."

Nabours still remained uneasy.

"I've got five thousand paper dollars in my saddle pockets," said he. "Where's Miss Taisie at? I want to pay off the men. They'll be wanting a little frolic. Won't you come along and find her?"

He looked at Dan McMasters keenly, a little sadly.

But though McMasters directed him to the Drovers' Cottage, he excused himself. For this reason not even cheery Lou Gore could make Taisie Lockhart smile.

McMasters went after Wild Bill, whom he found, hands in pockets, watching a faro game.

"I've watched your men," said Hickok, quietly getting McMasters to one side. "There are three or four of them. They don't show any signs of leaving town."

"The herd men are coming to town to-night," said McMasters. "If we want help I can get it."

The border man stroked his long yellow mustache.

"You and I wouldn't need any help if we didn't need any of them alive," said he. "I'm going to sit in with you on this, because you can hold up your end. We can stick around for a while. Of course, your man Rudabaugh knows you are here. He's got horses over at the Twin Livery Barn; I know that much. He may pull his freight any minute. Or he may be laying for a chance to plug you from around a corner."

McMasters nodded quietly. Hickok went on: "Well, they didn't keep your herd from coming through, did they? What price do you think your cattle will fetch?"

"They're already sold," said Dan McMasters.

He gave the details of the late transaction, including his own arrangement with Pattison for a northern-ranch venture. Hickok listened indifferently.

"I'm glad you took my advice," said he. "That's all out of my line. I only keep the peace. Looks like before long there'd be plenty of peace to keep.

"And that girl in the boy's clothes is rich, eh? Well, I'm glad, aren't you?"

"No one is gladder."

"Where is she now? She's vanished. Has she heard of the sale?"

"Not yet. Her foreman has just gone over to tell her. I think Lou Gore has been taking care of her. No, she doesn't know yet that she's rich."

CHAPTER XLIV

THE LOST SCRIP

JIM NABOURS, his shirt front bulging, approached the door of the Drovers' Cottage, near which he found a man tinkling a steel triangle, which one day soon would boom a summons thrice a day.

"How are you, sir?" began Nabours. "Can you tell me if Miss Taisie Lockhart is in here? She come up on that herd with us."

The husband of Lou Gore indicated the rear of the building. Unannounced, Nabours pushed on through the rear hall, beyond whose door he heard sounds of culinary conflict.

"Law, mister, ain't you in a sort of hurry?" said Lou Gore, a large spoon in one hand. "This is the kitchen. You go on out."

"But I want to see my boss," remonstrated the old foreman. "I've got five thousand dollars in my shirt for her."

Lou Gore wiped her hands on her apron.

"Well," said she, "if you've got five thousand dollars come on in. I'll let you see her if I can." She approached the bedroom door.

"Jim! Jim!" called a voice he knew very well, a voice full of eagerness now. The door flung open. Taisie,

shrouded in blankets, broke out, her radiant face framed in its mass of glowing hair. She flung an arm about the grizzled foreman's neck. He seemed almost the one friend in all the world for her. "I'm so glad you've come!"

"Miss Taisie," said Jim Nabours succinctly, "here is five thousand dollars. I reckon you'd better put on your pants—if you got nothing else."

But Taisie sank into a chair, enveloping herself in her blankets. Her eyes were startled.

"Five thousand dollars?"

"Yes, ma'am. I done sold the cows at twenty straight. There'll be about three thousand head. That's sixty thousand dollars, ma'am. This here, now, is only part of it. It'll be in and around sixty thousand. We can get the rest any time we want. I reckon we done right well for you, Miss Taisie."

Taisie Lockhart looked up at him with sudden tears in her eyes, weak in the reaction from the strain of years.

"I could kiss you, Jim!" said she.

"I wish you wouldn't, ma'am; not until I get shaved. Yes, ma'am, we done right well, all things considered. Now, I think you better get about five thousand worth of more clothes."

"She's got all the clothes she needs, she told me," remarked Lou Gore; "a whole trunk of clothes out there on the cart. We haven't had time to fetch it in yet."

"Why, shore she has, ma'am! We brung that trunk all the way from Texas. You can't ride a cow horse in them kind of clothes, ma'am. So Lord Lovel he

mounted his milk-white steed. Ain't she pretty, ma'am? Prettier'n any spotted pup ever was!

"But say, Miss Taisie," he went on to the girl who still sat huddled in her blankets, "I got to tell you all the news. Dan McMasters has throwed in with the man we sold our cows to. They're going to start a ranch up North here. We-all are a-goin' to drive cows up to their ranch next year. Dan, he's a partner in that; he's going to be plumb rich. I heard him say he was going to leave Texas, him sher'f and all.

"Far as that goes, if it hadn't of been for Dan, we maybe wouldn't have traded. He bid up for all the light stuff, at the same price the other man offered for fours—twenty straight through. Now, Dan——"

"For mercy sake, man, how you run on!" broke in Lou Gore. "You go help this black woman to bring in that trunk from the cart. This is the Fourth of July, and we may have some sort of dance here if them band people ain't too drunk. Go fetch that trunk."

"Well, all right, all right," said Jim Nabours. "I was just trying to tell the boss a few things she'd orter know."

But in three minutes Jim Nabours was back in the room, gray under his grime and tan.

"Miss Taisie," said he dully, "your trunk's gone! It ain't in the cart at all. The scrip in there was worth maybe five times as much as sixty thousand dollars. Lands'll go up in Texas now. And here I've lost all the scrip that yore paw give you!

"Miss Taisie, it was all my fault. I never did once think of that trunk a-tall; I was only thinking of cows."

"Why, Jim, who could have taken it?"

"I don't know," said Jim Nabours. "It's gone oncet more."

He stumbled into a chair.

"I reckon I'm too old now. I've let you get robbed oncet more."

CHAPTER XLV

THE MAN HUNT

THE sun sank gently back of the grasslands encircling Abilene. The night chill came, the quavering wail of the coyotes crept closer to the outskirts of the town, the unbelievably brilliant stars came out to illuminate a many-splendored night. But to these things Abilene paid little heed. She held festival on her day of triumph.

The fumes of liquor, the reek of packed humanity filled each insignificant room along Liquor Lane in Abilene. Especially crowded were the two more ambitious places, where dancing was obtainable in connection with strong drink. Here the scene was such as might best be forgotten as a part of the record of the outlands. There were a dozen or more women, or those who once had been women; and with these, in an obscenity that should balk any pen, a hundred or two hundred men danced.

A general confusion, many voices arising continuously, passed out of the open windows and open doors. The stamp of feet, shoutings, senseless laughter, shrill hysteria of females excited by drink, the coarser basso of males excited likewise, joined in a curious roar whose sensuous undertone resembled no other sound or blend of sounds in all the world. In no corner of the world

have the primitive instincts of man found fuller loosing than in the border capitals of the cow trails.

It was the etiquette—unvarying in Saxon outlands—that he who danced with a damsel must lead her to the bar after they twain had trod a measure, else lack in a decent respect for the opinion of mankind. Of actual sets, of any measured cæsura, there was none. The music was furnished by rum-soaked men who sat apart on barrels, the same who had welcomed that morning the first Texas herd ever seen in Abilene. Such as it was, and supported by fiery stimulant, the concord was continuous, the floors were always full. Men danced in hats and boots and spurs. The voice of a submerged set caller droned on: "Dolcie do! Allemand left! Swing your partner! Lift her high!" It was festival in Abilene.

McMasters and Wild Bill Hickok passed from door to door, the quietest and soberest men in all the town. There approached them a man in uniform, a sergeant of the United States Army. He recognized McMasters.

"I've been looking for you, sir," said he. "I am up from the Wichita Mountains, from Colonel Griswold. I've got two ambulances and an escort of five men for each. I was to offer you any help you required, sir, and to put the ambulances under your order if any of your people wished to travel south. The colonel could not come. He sends his compliments and hopes you are quite well. He thinks it would be much safer for you to travel south across the Nations under military escort. He hopes the young lady will occupy one ambulance for her own in case you sell out, and start south, sir."

"All right, sergeant," replied McMasters; "that's very fine of Colonel Griswold. The young lady has sold her herd to-day and will be starting south before long. Where are your ambulances and your men?"

The sergeant grinned, somewhat embarrassed.

"The ambulances are at the Twin Star Barn," said he. "I put my mules and horses in there too. I guess my men may be scattered."

"Stop your drinking," said Dan McMasters. "You may be needed to-night. Go get your men together. Be at the Silver Moon half an hour from now."

"Very good, sir," said the man, and saluted again. He cast a longing eye through windows as he passed down the street.

Near the door of the Silver Moon Dance Hall a man pushed by them, anxious; Nabours, looking around him, not hurrying to the bar.

"Dan!" he exclaimed as he caught sight of McMasters. His granite agitation, his naïve disregard of all the post, bridged any gap remaining between them. "Look here! Hell's to pay!"

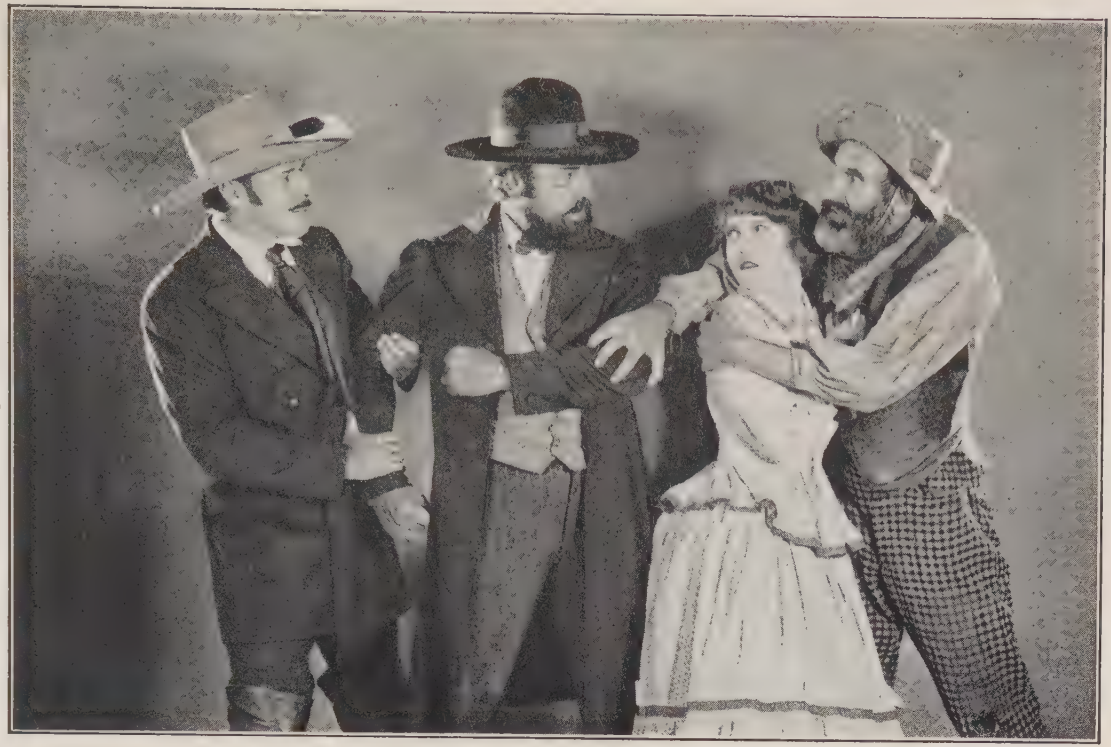
"What's up?" asked McMasters, startled by the look on his face. "Anything gone wrong with—her?"

"Yes! Miss Taisie's trunk is gone; it's been stole out of the cart right in front of the door. All her scrip was in it—you know what."

A sudden flush came to Dan McMaster's face.

"You are rather a fine foreman, aren't you, Jim?" said he. "Was that the best you could use that girl?"

"Call me anything you like. I'm a damned old fool.



A Paramount Picture.

"HANDS OFF, RUDABAUGH!" ROARS BIG JIM.

North of 36.

I've quit her hire. I gave her the money and quit her hire right here."

"Don't you know that Sim Rudabaugh and some of his gang are in town right now? They've beat us, after all; they've got the scrip, even if they couldn't stop the herd. Rudabaugh can get his lands now in spite of you and me. He'll own all the state of Texas, west of the Double Mountain Fork. He'll get what Miss Lockhart's father left her, her fortune in lands. We have been making money for him, not her! You let that thing happen right now, when I have almost got my hand on his collar!" He spoke with greater bitterness than any man had ever known of him. At length the indomitable side of his nature took sway again. "But we'll comb out the town first. Go get McCoyne."

They did get McCoyne, and solicited his aid in such general search for the missing treasure chest as they hurriedly could contrive. It all was hopeless. No one had seen two men carrying a trunk. The cart was precisely where it had been left. No vehicle had left town, no train. The Del Sol treasure trunk simply had disappeared.

The allies, discomfited, met at last in the open street, Hickok having joined them by this time, and having heard the story.

"Hark!" said the latter, raising a hand.

His keen ears had caught the sound which presently became obvious to them all—the pounding of hoofs, yelling of riders in concert. Sweeping over the prairies at top speed, the herdsmen of Del Sol were coming in to have their share in the Fourth of July celebration. But as they stood looking to the north there came the

sound of a heavy rifle shot, close at hand. A red streak came from the window near the kitchen of the Cottage. Two men came running. On general principles Hickok halted them.

"What was that shot?" he demanded.

"That?" panted one of the runners. "That old negro woman. She got scared and shot through the window."

But by now Hickok thought he had recognized the speaker as one of the men he had seen talking with Rudabaugh earlier in the day. The two fugitives turned into the door of the Silver Moon Dance Hall just before the Del Sol riders swept up and cast down their bridle reins. All the overflow population of Abilene seemed to be packed into or on one side or other of the door of the Silver Moon. Hickok, Nabours, McMasters pushed in through the crowd hard after the Del Sol men, unkempt, ragged, wild, troubled with no false modesty as to their own place in the world. They pushed on up to the bar, Len Hersey leading them.

"Come on, men!" called the high voice of that lusty youth. "I got enough dinero for one little time, and I'm going to have more. Set 'em up, mister, and do it quick. You come in here, Sanchez—come on, Sinker!"

Then pushed forward from among them the thin figure of a boy, ragged, unshorn, his hair through his hat, his lower extremities pushed through a pair of leather leggings a world too large for him. It was Cinquo's first appearance at a public bar, part of his education for his calling. At his shoulder was the thin figure of a dark man, old, grizzled, imperturbable —Sanchez, the only Mexican on the Del Sol herd. Unsmilingly Sanchez drew from under his coat the

object which had had a place on his saddle horn. He set down upon the bar a much bedraggled, entirely dilapidated gamecock—nothing less than Gallina, whom he had cherished for a thousand miles. And Gallina now repaid him. He cast a red eye over the multitude and bade defiance to the world in a long and lusty crow. A peal of laughter broke from the crowd. Again the voice of Len Hersey arose.

"This here rooster can lick ary chicken in the state of Kansas, five hunderd a battle. This here boy and his horse can outrun ary outfit in this town, ary distance, for five hundred a race. I can whip ary man in this here room myself. We're just from Texas and we're wild and woolly. Our steers has longer horns than anybody's. Del Sol has came to town!"

The not ill-natured rioters crowded about him and his fellows, accosting him partly in jest and partly in earnest. The Del Sol orator leaned against the bar and faced them.

"Come on, men!" said Hersey, sweeping a wide arm. "Here goes all the money I've got—couple of hunderd! Say, mister, is our credit good when that runs out?"

"There ain't no man's credit good here when his money runs out," replied the barman sullenly. "Take that hen off my bar. Go ask your owner that dresses in pants why she hasn't paid off her men earlier."

A sort of squealing yell arose above the tumult. The boy Cinquo had wheeled like a flash, his heavy revolver in hand. His sweeping blow struck the bartender on the top of the head and dropped him motionless as a log.

"You can't say her name in no saloon!" shrilled the boy. "That's no way to treat us folks from Texas.

If there's any of you-all looking for trouble you can git it right here!"

"That's what you can!" cried Len Hersey, touching elbows. The men of Del Sol edged close together. "Take a drink, Sinker—we'll owe it to this house if you haven't got no money."

The boy reached out his hand, thin, freckled, unwavering, toward the bottle which stood near. It was his first drink at a bar. Well, he had to begin.

"You hear me!" again called out Len Hersey. "This kid gits his drink free right now. We bar any talk against our boss."

But a tall figure pushed through the crowd directly up to Hersey.

"Look here, my friend," said Wild Bill Hickok, "I know who you are and it's all right, but you're making too much noise. Just keep quiet now. Son, you don't get any drink—it wouldn't do you any good."

He reached out and took the glass which Cinquo Centavos had filled for himself. Whether or not even Wild Bill could have done so much as this without trouble happily did not come into question. McMasters, Nabours, now appeared at his side.

"Shut your mouth, Len," said Nabours. "Somebody's liable to fill you full of holes. You know mighty well we've got to trail the bulk of the herd to-morrow over to the Smoky Hill and Junction City. Take a drink or so, and then keep your hand off the liquor till you get done your work."

No one seemed to pay any attention to the prone figure of the barkeeper, who lay on the floor beyond the bar. A sort of hush in the maudlin manifestations

came upon the closely packed assemblage at the sight of the unmistakable figure of Wild Bill, whose reputation was known over all the borderlands.

It was in this hush, at this dead center, that there came a sudden flash and roar from the back of the crowded hall. Dan McMasters, turning to look over the bar at the fallen man, felt a sudden flick at the collar of his coat. A bottle on the shelf beyond crashed to bits. A lamp toward the rear of the hall went out under the concussion.

McMasters wheeled, both weapons in hand, looking out over the surging mass of men and women. He was just a second later than the future marshal of Abilene, who had not turned. The tall figure of Hickok straightened like a flash to his full height. His arm rose high, pointing a red line of flame. At the rear of the room a man dropped. He had been shot squarely through the forehead, the bullet passing just above the heads of the others.

What happened then no man knew. There was a mad rush towards the door. Women screamed and sought to escape by the windows. A score of guns were drawn. No man knew where stood his enemy.

Midway of the mad rush in the rear of the room three men came crouching, crowding, each with a gun in his hand. They endeavored to keep together; and thus, being recognized as a source of danger, certain of the crowd pushed away from them, left them more readily visible.

"Let them out!" The command came high and clear. McMasters laid a hand on Hickok's arm. "Let them get out on the street!"

He had recognized, as one of the three men, the man he had come so far to meet—his arch enemy Rudabaugh. But he did not fire.

Hickok stayed his hand. He did not look toward the rear of the room, now cleared, for he knew his work there was done. He never was known to look at the effect of any shot he ever made; he always knew. There stood now at his side a man as dangerous as himself. But the two best pistol men on all that wild border now dared not shoot, had they so desired, for the men had shrugged down below the level of the crowd.

"That's Rudabaugh in front!" called McMasters. "Don't shoot him! Let him alone! Let him get out!"

He himself began to edge toward the door, Wild Bill pushing through the crowd at his elbow. The Del Sol men for the time were jostled back.

It was Rudabaugh who had sought to end at any cost the life of his worst enemy, Dan McMasters. He had missed, across the room, but now intended to kill McMasters at short range. But always some other man intervened, caught down his arm.

He made a sudden last plan—often a deadly one—stepped outside the door and waited for his man to follow—an old border trick which very often worked. The shooter would be in the darkness, his target in the light.

But the wily bandit leader had reckoned ill with the men he now was meeting. Even as he passed over the threshold Hickok suddenly fired over McMasters' shoulder. His bullet struck the barrel of Rudabaugh's revolver and hurled it from his hand. An instant later the two officers broke out the door. Rudabaugh, wring-

ing his hand, was stooping for his revolver, his two companions making off at top speed in the moonlight.

As for the latter, they both fell face forward, shot through the back. Neither of their two executioners had time to look at them. Both covered Rudabaugh as he half rose.

"Don't shoot!" cried McMasters once more. "Leave him to me!"

An instant later and he was locked in grips with the ruffian he had sought so long to meet in precisely this fashion. Hickok stood back, his elbows at the door jamb, a revolver in either hand.

"Easy, gentlemen!" said he. "Easy now! Don't come out! Just stay right where you are!"

Every man who heard heeded the advice of Wild Bill and set back his shoulders against the thrust behind him.

The combat on the beaten ground in front of the Silver Moon did not long endure. McMasters had borne down his man at the first leap. Rudabaugh's right hand was still numb from the impact of the ball which had struck his weapon. Moreover, he was much older than his antagonist, soft with drink and excess of every imaginable sort, little more than the shell of a man; whereas his enemy was young, sound, hard and lithe as a panther. One fought a battle with the result foreordained, the other sought to postpone the end. McMasters was absolutely merciless when finally he twisted Rudabaugh's arm behind him and flung him face down on the ground.

Handcuffs were unknown in that land. McMasters pushed his knees up under Rudabaugh's elbows, gripped

his hands together and twisted a silk handkerchief around them, tying it into a knot.

"Get up!"

He kicked Rudabaugh into obedience, caught him by the collar when he stood, hated him so bitterly that he was much of the mind to shoot him even now. But at length his calmness came back to him as Hickok approached once more, McCoyne also pushing forward.

"Where am I going to keep this man?" demanded McMasters. It was McCoyne who answered.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I certainly apologize. I might have known we'd need a jail, but I've been so busy I haven't had time to fix up a lot of things. Give me a day or so, and I'll show you that Abilene has got the best jail in Kansas. I've been so busy——"

Wild Bill turned back to Len Hersey, who now had got out at the door.

"Go get your rope and help this officer," said he. "Now go home, all of you." He turned toward the crowd. "You've had enough to drink and you've got enough Fourth of July for one day."

He grinned as he turned once more toward McMasters.

"If you should happen to take your friend out of town," said he, "I don't see how I could help myself. There don't seem to be any courts here, or any place to hold a prisoner."

Rudabaugh broke out in blasphemy.

"You damned outlaws, you cutthroats!" he began. "You can't take me without any warrant, and you can't hold me without process of law. I demand counsel.

I'm going to have my trial. Is this America, I want to know?"

"You said it," remarked Bill Hickok. "That's just what it is."

Now came running the men of the military escort. McMasters addressed the sergeant.

"Help me get this man over to the livery barn."

They led Rudabaugh away. He was cursing, struggling, sobbing. Wild Bill stood looking after them, with no apparent concern. He evinced no interest in the victims of the night affray. He had known worse scenes of violence all his life, been in many encounters of greater danger. To him these matters were much in the day's work sometimes, always tempered with the killer's fatalism, which valued nothing save the fact that he found himself still alive.

"Well, Joe," said he, turning to McCoyne, who stood near, "it seems like the law of habeas corpus hasn't got quite as far west as the Twin Livery Barn. If it has I'll suspend habeas corpus in this town until Captain McMasters gets his prisoner out of town and headed south."

CHAPTER XLVI

FAIR EXCHANGE

ALL day alone, a stranger, almost a prisoner in Lou Gore's little room, Taisie Lockhart for once in her life was now almost in a condition of hysteria. The strain and stress of the long trail journey, the anxiety of her hazard of fortunes, the relaxation of success—and now all these scenes and sounds of violence in combination so worked upon her worn nerves that she no longer was herself. Lou Gore was much put to it to comfort her, and, indeed, was glad enough to welcome Jim Nabours and the boy Cinquo, who later in the evening came in to tell the news of the affair at the Silver Moon. These two paused in the outer room, not daring to ask once more to see their mistress.

"You tell her, ma'am," said Jim Nabours. "Tell her we got Rudabaugh safe and his gang busted wide open —three of them killed. Dan McMasters, he taken Rudabaugh prisoner hisself in a fair stand-up fight."

"Well, all right, all right," responded Lou Gore; "I'll tell her anything. Nobody in town has had any supper yet. We can't have no dance now. This is the beatingest Fourth of July ever I did see. I declare, you cowboys give me more trouble than my gamblers.

"I don't want to be nasty to you," she went on.

"But you've got to keep out of my kitchen. Here, take a couple of keys and go on upstairs and go to bed. I declare, I am right tired my own self."

Meekly obedient, although reluctant not to see the mistress of Del Sol before he slept, Jim Nabours clumsily climbed the stairs, the boy close at his heels.

"What's wrong, Mister Jim?" asked Cinquo solicitously. "Ain't we sold out all right?"

"Yes," said his foreman gruffly. "We've won out on the cows. But we've lost out on the land. You know that trunk?"

"Shore. I do. It was always getting in the road everywheres."

"It won't be no more! It's gone—lost—stole. It was worth ten times as much as all our cows. Old Rudabaugh knows where it is, but he ain't so apt to tell."

As he spoke he flung open the door of a room, one of many precisely alike on either side of the upper hall. But he paused.

"Hello!" said he. "There's some one in here now, and he's gone to bed."

The bed indeed was occupied—occupied by a long and motionless figure, a pillow slip drawn across his face, the hands folded on the breast.

"I'll be——" Jim Nabours halted as something caught his eye. He stepped forward, drew back the face covering.

"Why, it's Cal Dalhart!" said he. "He's dead all right—but they done told me he was buried! McCoyne told me he seen it done hisself!"

The boy came and stared down in awe at the long and motionless figure, the white face.

"Him and Del, now——"

But Nabours took him by the arm. The two went down the stairs once more into the office room.

"Mister," said Nabours to the gloomy occupant, handing over his key, "you'd better give me another room."

"What's the matter with the one you've got?" demanded the landlord of the Drovers' Cottage.

"Somebody in it now," replied Nabours, "and he's dead. They told me that you-all got a couple of men to bury that man that got shot. Is that right? It was Mr. McCoyne told me that. Where is he?"

Sounds of voices came through the open door. A group of men were talking excitedly in the moonlight. The landlord summoned in one of these—McCoyne, ubiquitous and sleepless. To him Nabours repeated his query.

"Certainly, sir," replied McCoyne. "I saw the two men carrying the coffin between them. I saw them bury him as plain as I ever saw anything in all my life! Of course, I wasn't right out there with them. I been so busy——"

"Well, he ain't buried now," said Jim Nabours. "Cal Dalhart's up there, upstairs."

"Don't that beat anything you ever heard!" exclaimed McCoyne. "It seems like everything goes wrong unless a man does it his own self, don't it now?"

"You come along with me," said Nabours, moved by a sudden thought of his own. "You get two men—new ones. I believe them two folks that buried Cal Dalhart

is both dead theirselfs. Bring a couple of shovels. Hurry up!"

A little group of men departed in the moonlight on a certain gruesome errand. It was Jim Nabours himself who began at the loose dirt of the mound at whose head there had been erected a little headboard: "C. Dalhart, of Texas. Died July 4, 1867. May he rest in peace."

"He couldn't never rest in peace thisaway," said Jim Nabours a half hour later. His shovel struck something hard.

"Here, lend us a hand," said he. "Sinker, get hold the other handle of this trunk. It's heavy. Huh! It's got a half million acres of Texas land into it!"

"And we've got Sim Rudabaugh over in the livery stable," he added after a time thoughtfully, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "This ain't no bad day's work a-tall. You people go on back and bring Cal over here and we'll bury him right. A fair exchange ain't no robbery."

CHAPTER XLVII

THE COURT OF THE COMANCHES

FOUR days later the transient population of Abilene began to scatter. No one knew when another herd would come, if ever. The great Del Sol herd now was split up, a portion coming into the yards to try for an Eastern market, a greater portion driven east to the crude packing plant at Junction City. The remainder, under Len Hersey and a half dozen of the best men of the Del Sol herd, was driven north to the new range on the Smoky Hill. All the details of Abilene's first transaction in cows now were closed. The bill of sale, the record of the tally, the passing of the final bank draft—all details soon to become familiar in the northern-range towns—now were completed. The Del Sol horse band was sold north. Remained only the two carts, each with its double yoke of oxen, and two horses each for eight of the hands who had concluded to return to Texas. The two Army ambulances offered transport for the remainder of those who had come north in the saddle. Taisie's horse, Blancocito, was left to trot alongside, unsaddled.

Lou Gore kissed Taisie Lockhart for the last time, tears in the eyes of both; then wiped her hands and eyes upon her apron and turned back to build up her reputation as the biggest-hearted woman on the Plains.

What friend she was to the wild men of the trail, countless wounded, crippled, ill and helpless cowmen learned in the years to come; years of swift changes on the upper range. A good soul, a strong heart of the frontier, she left a beloved and covetable memory.

The ambulances, each drawn by four sleek mules, stood in the street waiting, flanked by stalwart troopers. In the foremost vehicle, on a middle seat, hidden from view, sat Sim Rudabaugh, and gyves were on his wrists. Thongs of rawhide, right and left, bound his hands to the seat ends. Other thongs fastened his ankles and passed back under the seat to a cross pole. In the seat behind sat Dan McMasters and the boy Cinquo, both armed. Rudabaugh could never have escaped. The ruthless trail bandit, who never took a prisoner, himself was a prisoner at last. To all his sobbings, his expostulations, his execrations and his questions, no one made any answer. Of friends he had none in all the world. He was at the end of the trail of the transgressor.

This ambulance, of course, must drive faster than the others, which would hold back with the Del Sol carts. In the second ambulance, well escorted, Taisie was to ride with her foreman, Nabours. In this was stowed a certain trunk covered with rawhide.

But as this little cavalcade stood halted in midstreet of the cloudless morning, most of the remaining men of Abilene came clamoring for the privilege of one more farewell to the Texas girl. Taisie leaned forward to greet them as they came, herself beautiful as the dawn, in spite of the new droop at the corners of her mouth.

Dan McMasters had said his own good-bys briefly,

coldly—the coldest man in all the world, she thought. He never once had met her for a moment alone. Of that swift brief fire of two earlier times only ashes remained, unblown of any gust of passion.

McCoyne flitted from one vehicle to the other, excitedly making his adieus.

"Come back again!" said he. "We'll be waiting for you next year. Tell every ranch in Texas to send up their herds. You'll see Abilene with a jail and a church and a school and a graveyard the next time you come. I have been so busy——"

Came among the very last a woman of the Silver Moon, young in years but weary and old at this hour of the morning. Timidly she reached out her hand through the curtains of the ambulance and Taisie took it.

"Good-by," said the girl; "good-by, my dear. You're the first woman ever came to Abilene. Don't come back again"—and so departed to the Silver Moon, herself once a woman, and seeing Taisie's eyes following the tall young man.

Pattison, the Northern stockman, spent some time in final conversation with Mr. Dan McMasters.

"Believe me, son," said he, with a final farewell, "when you marry and settle down with me up here I'll make you richer than you ever dreamed of being. Go back home and put up a herd of stockers for next spring. Tell the Texas drovers to come along. There's going to be money in cows now."

McMasters reached out and took his hand.

"I'll be back next season with a herd," said he. "So long!"

Among all these others also came Wild Bill Hickok,

future town marshal of Abilene. By odd chance, partly due to his own shyness, he had never in all these days met Taisie Lockhart. He did not mean to intrude now, but inadvertently peered in at the curtains of her ambulance. She saw him push back the curtain, reached out her hand, smiling. He took it, held it, stood awed at her very beauty, pondering for a time sadly, her hand in his, in one of the fits of melancholy which came to him at times. As he knew his life of the past, so he read all his future.

"You remind me of Agnes," said he simply. "That's my wife. She's back home. Be good. Good-by."

With McMasters he spoke at first hardly so much even as that. They shook hands, each looking into the eyes of the other.

"Good luck!" said Hickok. "Don't say I didn't help you with the habeas corpus. If you run into any one down below kill this man first."

He nodded at Rudabaugh. The latter broke out blasphemously once more. But the blue eye of the man who had killed the last of the Rudabaugh gang of border thieves paid him not even a contemptuous attention. He turned away.

Now came the parting crack of a whip on the air of the morning, rumble of wheels on the streets of Abilene, already growing dustier. Abilene, center of revolutionary changes soon to be, lay behind them presently. The Del Sol folk were homeward bound.

On the long journey to the South, after the first hour, the leading ambulance vehicle never again was sighted. From day to day, from camp to camp, at one

river crossing after another, the slower travelers found proof of attempts to make their progress as safe and easy as possible. There were rafts and boats, each left on the north bank of the stream. Fords were marked out with poles. What with the passing of Jesse Chisholm's wagon trail to the Arbuckle Mountains, and the additional care of McMasters and the Army men, the passage southward, thus well equipped, was child's play compared with the long and dangerous journey northbound with the herd. The lead ambulance easily did forty and fifty miles a day, the ox carts twelve, fifteen, sometimes twenty.

Again and again Taisie Lockhart felt growing upon her her sense of indebtedness to a man with whom she could never come to terms. One thing seemed certain —they now had parted company forever. He was leaving Texas, going North to live. Bitterly the girl resolved that all material obligations between them, at least, should one day be discharged, though it should take her last dollar.

Not once on all the long journey did McMasters ever accost his prisoner. Cold as a tourmaline, his green-gray eyes looked Rudabaugh straight in the face when occasion came. But that was all. At night the prisoner had chance to sleep, no chance to escape. If McMasters himself caught a continuous hour or two of sleep, the boy Cinquo took his place, his weapon across his knee. Men fed Rudabaugh with no more ceremony than had he been a captive animal.

Thus, on one morning, two days' march south of the Washita, McMasters and his men raised the rough highlands of Medicine Bluff Creek, where sat Camp

Wichita which not long thereafter was to be known as Fort Sill, thanks to the earlier and long-forgotten efforts of that great soldier of the West, R. B. Marcy, captain of the Fifth Infantry; the first explorer for the Army in those parts, and a wise man in Indian matters in his day. He had predicted the savage campaign of two years later, of Sheridan, Custer, which proved needful to chastise the upper tribesmen, of Black Kettle, on the Washita.

As to the reservation which later was to hold the Comanches, subsequent to the series of tribal defeats wrought by Custer along the Washita, nothing was consummated until the following year. The main body of the Quahrada Comanches—those who had the Staked Plains as their hunting grounds—had traveled on back home. But here in the Wichita Mountains sturdy Sandy Griswold still held old Yellow Hand and his select band of warriors, waiting for word from north of the Arkansas. He had told Yellow Hand to wait until his young men came. Then they could go back home. And Yellow Hand himself was the first to announce the coming of men from the north.

The welcome between McMasters and Griswold was brief. The latter looked inside the ambulance.

"You've got your man!" said he grimly. "How about the others?"

"They resisted arrest, sir," replied Dan McMasters. "I had the help of Wild Bill Hickok at Abilene. I have kept my word and brought in Rudabaugh for you. Here's your man."

"Get out, you!" He spoke to Rudabaugh the first time, and cut his bands.

The prisoner climbed stiffly down and looked about him. He faced a row of Army tents, a few rough huts. A clump of Indian tepees stood not far distant. A strong shudder came across the body of Sim Rudabaugh. His face went white in sudden premonition.

The Comanches were waiting for the man who had killed their women.

"Oh, my God!" moaned the prisoner, now really contrite. "Oh, my God, have mercy!" Even then he knew.

Griswold called for his interpreter, ordered the Comanches to come before his tent. They sat in council, the pipe passed. The beady eyes of the Comanches were fixed on the prisoner, but they sat in silent dignity until the proper time. At length Griswold arose, addressing Yellow Hand and pointing to Rudabaugh, whom he kept standing, his hands again bound.

"Tell him," said Griswold, nodding to his interpreter, and speaking to Yellow Hand, "this is the man who shot down your women when they were bathing over there by the Arbuckle Hills. You Quahradas, of the Staked Plains, were visiting here. You had not harmed this man. He was not at war with you. You had not harmed him. He killed your women. He did not seek out your warriors.

"I said to you that I would bring this man back to you for you to try. You can punish him as you like. I give him to you. You do not know this man. You only know that the men who wear a yellow stripe on

their leggings never have lied to you. This is the man who killed your women. I say it."

He raised his hand as Yellow Hand started forward, his face convulsed.

"But I have your promise also, Yellow Hand. You shall not lie to me. When I give him to you in place of your two women you must do as you have promised.

"Will you now go back to your people and tell them to sit down? Will you tell them to leave the war trail on the Staked Plains, to leave our white towns and ranches alone, and the cattle they drive north?

"Will you come here, all of you, and join the northern Comanches and your brothers the Kiowas and sit down forever, here on your land, where the buffalo are many and the deer are running in the thickets as many as the leaves on the trees? Here the sun is warm, the grass is good, the water is sweet and cool.

"Will you do all these things, Yellow Hand? Are you done fighting with the white man? I promise you that next year, and the year after, the white soldiers will take the winter trail against the villages of the Cheyennes and their friends. No matter how cold it is, no matter how deep the snow is, our men will find their village and wipe them out. You Indians must stop stealing horses and cattle and killing our men on the ranches.

"Will you Quahradas, who are wise men, make your peace first and save your women and your children? If I give you this man will you open the trails for the cows that want to go north? Will you come in here and sit down? Promise me that, Yellow Hand!

Speak only the truth to me! I know how to punish men who lie."

The face of the old savage still worked with rage; his eyes still were riveted on the miscreant who stood bound before him, tragic pledge for the future safety of the Trail. But now Yellow Hand knew himself to be the leader of his people. He rose with his arms folded.

"I speak the truth, now, here, even as the chief of the white men speaks it," said he. "You have done as you have said you would do. Give us that man that you said you would give us. We will do with him as your people would do with us. We will try him in our way. I will talk with my men. We will punish him in our way. Then when we have done that we will wrap our robes about us. We will come in here and sit down in this land, which we know is good.

"I can see that the white people are too many. They are making roads across the grass. Some day the buffalo will be gone. Over their trails will walk these new cattle—have we not seen them come? I can hear their hoofs coming, as many as the wind can count among the trees. It is done. I have said all I want to say."

"Rudabaugh," said Griswold, turning to him at length, with no pity in his eye, "get ready to die. God may have no mercy on your soul. You've shown none —not once in all your life. Take what you've earned!"

Rudabaugh broke out with denunciation of the utter illegality of all this.

"I know it," said Griswold. "But this court carries no records. No one will ever know."

He pushed forward the man, who now so trembled he scarce could stand. The sinewy fingers of Yellow Hand gripped his shoulder like eagle talons. A warrior caught him on the opposite side. He was dragged away, fighting, to the door of the largest lodge.

For an hour there came through the distance only the sound of savage singing. At length the white men, sitting solemnly awake in their own encampment, saw a group of the Comanches come out from the lodge and start toward a little thicket which lay perhaps a hundred yards or so away. They dragged with them something which scarce stood erect, held back with palsied feet.

"My God, Mister Dan," broke out the voice of a boy all too young for such a scene, but taking one more lesson in border ways, "what are they goin' to do to him now?"

But the savage justice of the tribesmen was done in such fashion as only these fiends of the lower border could have devised. No pen should specify as to this.

For a time, for five minutes perhaps, or more, there came from the thicket shrieks of a man in torture, such sounds as left these hardened men unable to look one another in the face, though not one of them wavered in his own savage decision. Now it was too late. The word of the white men had been given.

No smoke, no sign of fire arose above the top of the little thicket. There was no sound but that of the shrieking victim. The Comanches had devised some new way of punishment.

Yellow Hand came back after a long time, a smile contorting his great mouth.

"Him run little way," said he, wiping his hands on his leggings. "No skin on him—he can't run far."

And for reason of that which had gone on in yonder thicket by the little stream—by reason of what one time was found flung across the bush tops there—that bloody stream came to be called the Rawhide.

The Comanche reservation, thus purchased, later established, was close to that spot. Far to the west, above Doan's Crossing, over the high country where soon a dozen trails were to blend—seeking Ellsworth, Newton, Wichita, Dodge, Great Bend, Ogalalla, all the Army posts and all the empty upper range—the Comanches fought no more.

The day of the northbound hegira of the cows had come. The immortal gods, trickling through their fingers grasses of grama, mesquite, redtop, buffalo, bluestem, watched a new land spring lustily into being. It was born of blood. But it was born of South and North, which never again were to know war one with the other. Both shared in sending old customs to a new land. A new language came to it. New industries grew in it. More rapidly than any tract of all our country or of any country ever was settled, the Great West of America became great and strong indeed. It wrote its story—whose beginnings almost have faded now—on the pages of the world's history; or more splendidly still, on the lips of a country's envying tradition of Homeric deeds.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE GREAT LODESTONE

IT WAS morning of an autumn day on the old rancho of Laguna de Sol. Although flowers lacked, the leaves of the live oaks held their perennial course unchanged, the heavy pendants of the Spanish moss aiding them against the rays of a sun still ardent. The air was almost without movement, too richly languorous for any exercise—sweet, rich, mellow and golden as honey, breath of a world caring for neither past nor future.

The surface of the placid fields where grain had been now seemed as though covered by a moving carpet of gray and gold—countless field larks, come to this gentle region for their wintering. In the great lagoon beyond the live-oak groves countless wild fowl, also from north of thirty-six, had come below the edge of winter for their annual vacation. The cattle lay contented in the sun, horses stood dozing, free of care. Del Sol never had seemed more beautiful or shown more rapport with the mere facts of life.

Anastasie Lockhart, mistress of Del Sol, was in her dooryard, looking after morning-glory seed for the coming year. These and other climbing things had well-nigh taken possession of the big house during her absence north the past summer. There had been

no hand to give the old place any ministrations, and in the fecund Southwest the fight of civilization against an eager Nature, claiming its own, is a continuous one. Years of poverty, which had meant also years of negligence, now obliged youth and inexperience to begin in a weak way the task of restoration. Del Sol had lacked the strong and resourceful hand of its founder.

Not that courage and resourcefulness lacked for the present owner of Del Sol—nor, indeed, that material means now lacked, after the astonishingly successful venture of the northern drive. And the steady ruin into which the place had advanced had been due more than anything else to an actual lack of material resources.

Anastasie Lockhart had been poor. But now she was not poor. The venture north had brought her in touch with the Aladdin lamp. Now she could hold up her head and look all the world in the face. Now she could pay her debts and be once more a Lockhart of the Lockharts, worthy when on her knees to look her departed father's shade calmly in the face and to declare his faith kept with all the world.

This very morning Anastasie Lockhart had paid her men their wages for the month; indeed, but just now she had come from the cook-house door; where not so long before she had stood, haltingly confessing to them that she could not pay her laborers their hire. It was different to-day.

Not all the old Del Sol men now were at their table, for some had taken service north, perhaps never again to set foot on Texas soil, and others had not

yet drifted home from seeing the world. Buck, the cook, still was there; and it appeared that both he and Milly had agreed to forget the past of Milly's missing husband. Milly agreeing that she had "taken up with Buck," believing him to be the moral superior of the missing Jim. The place of Del Williams was vacant, nor was Len Hersey's light garrulity now audible. No heirs of Cal Dalhart had been found.

There were new men on Del Sol, new horses and new cows. Old Jim Nabours, when he swung into saddle that morning, had at his side only one man of the old Del Sol clan—the boy Cinquo Centavos, now resplendent in the full regalia of the range and much more the man for his adventurings in far lands. Both these had stood at Blancocito's head to assist their mistress in mounting when she rode back to the big house.

So now Taisie Lockhart was pretty much alone as she pottered about the galleries of the old house, searching for morning-glory seeds, putting them into her cupped left hand. She was in riding habit now, her male attire discarded, and a sidesaddle fretted Blancocito; not the old saddle of low horn and double cinch, which he had yielded only after a long and bitter fight against the new substitute.

What a change since that other morning of the spring, half a year ago, when she had returned from the cook-house door! Could this unsmiling young lady, tall and dignified, well clad, be the same Taisie Lockhart of that other day? On which day had she been rich, on which day poor? A world intervened between the two. Anastasie Lockhart, a new little

droop at the corner of her mouth, knew that were it possible she would give this day for that other—that day when she was poor. That was when first she saw a tall young man ride in at her gate, whom she had never seen again since their cold parting in the street of Abilene.

Some thought, some sound unrecognized, something in the air—she knew not what—caused Taisie's cupped hand to cease accumulating morning-glory seeds, the fingers of the other to halt arrested in the air. She turned. That same rider now was entering her gate.

The face of the mistress of Del Sol went pale. She dropped her morning-glory seeds.

The rider, tall, slender, very straight, very easy in saddle, came on in directly through the gate, which a darky boy had opened for him. But he did not this morning, as upon that other morning, ride to the cook-house yard. Upon the contrary, at the same steady gentle and unbroken trot, he rode up, unfaltering, unagitated, to the gallery of Del Sol. His hat in hand, he dismounted not a dozen paces from where stood Anastasia, dumb and motionless, pale, even in the Texan sun.

He also, for the time, was dumb. He came straight up to her without speaking. She noticed certain things, intimately shrewd, her memory holding every detail of the man whom for months she had known she loved in spite of every endeavor.

He was scrupulously neat, now, as he had always been. His clothing was new and good. His collar and his cuffs were white—pure white, in good linen. Once

—she vaguely remembered it now—he had not worn white; had explained to her some reason for the dull red of his linen.

And there was another change, she was sure of this—he was unarmed! The heavy weapons no longer swung at his belt, nor even showed in his saddle holsters. For the first time since she had known him she saw him weaponless.

He seemed another man, for some reason, she could not tell what. The same imperturbable calm, the same level gaze of the eye, the same inscrutable mask of countenance were his, and still he seemed to retain his habit of casting the burden of speech upon others than himself; but there was about him something different. Sometimes we feel some such indefinable change in a man who has suffered a great sickness or met with some great reverse.

"I wish you good morning, Mr. McMasters," said Anastasie, half irritated at the length of his silence, though never had his eyes wavered from her face. He had wanted to speak, but his lifelong reticence glued his lips.

He made no immediate reply, disdainful as usual of the irrelevant, the inconsequent. At length he drew from his inner pocket a folded bit of paper.

"I have come to bring you this, Miss Lockhart," said he, and gave it her.

She looked at it, recognized it, and colored deeply.

"It was my wish that you should have it," said she.

"No, I cannot."

"And why not? It is only right and fair that I

should pay my debts, the same as any other person. My father paid his. I sent you the draft as I was bound to do. I wanted to pay you—especially wanted to pay you." Her color heightened.

"Why?"

"Why? To square my obligations to you. They were enough. If I had known before I started what a load of debt you had put on me, there would never have been a Del Sol cow driven north. I'd have died, starved, rather than have been under any such obligation to you! I'd have choked if I'd known I was eating your bread!"

"And you think you have paid all your debt now with this?"

She twisted the paper of the bank draft in her fingers, unconsciously dropped it on the ground.

"No," said she, honest always; "there are some things that one can't pay. There are some things that can't be paid. But I sent you the draft, guessing at the total because I could never get a statement from the men fairly covering the advances you made us without my knowledge. We did eat your bread. Without you and your supplies—your horses, your everything—without your care and help all the way over the trail, we couldn't have started and couldn't have got through. Ah"—bitterly—"we couldn't even have sold so well at the end of the trail. That's all true. It's the cruelest truth that ever was offered me."

"You didn't want to be helped, not even by your neighbor?"

"Not in that way; not after all—after everything—after some things had come out as they did."

"You mean, after your own fault had found you out, don't you? Isn't that the cruelest part of it?"

His words were merciless, yet his voice was kind, gentle, beyond compare with any voice she had heard in all her life.

"Yes!" she broke out. "Yes, I suppose that's true. But you have had no mercy; you show none now. Did you come here this morning to make me say that?"

"Yes," said Dan McMasters; "that is why I did come. I knew that sometime you'd want to tell me that. I knew that before I went away from you, you'd want to be Lockhart enough to admit to a McMasters that no McMasters ever born could be the dishonorable man you thought I was. You sent me out of your camp with a brand on me that I never would have taken if I hadn't loved you the first minute I saw you—and if I hadn't known that some day you'd want to tell me you were wrong."

Anastasie Lockhart spread out her hands.

"Haven't I? I have repented it every night and every day since then. But of what use? You are not one who can forgive. You only want to shame and humiliate me, you can't forgive. You wouldn't let me, wouldn't believe me, wouldn't forgive me. You say you can't change."

"Are you so sure?" His voice spoke as though in answer to some question of his own. "Which of us can be sure of anything? Who knows about these things?"

He pulled himself together, trying not to let his emotions go, to hold to safe things.

"Do you think my father or yours would let us be anything but neighbors?" he began. "Did not those two gentlemen fight all their lives together, for their principles, for their state? They were friends, even after the war, even in the war. If you had a brother, do you suppose my sister could make any payment to him for things like this? Those men were Texans."

"You did nothing for me, then," said Anastasie Lockhart, trying to be furious. "You did not think of me; you thought of Texas. You thought of everything but me!"

"Anastasie," said he quietly, "that isn't right. I have thought of nothing else but you since I met you. Love—why, you can't measure what love will do!"

"Love, sir?"

But now his words rushed.

"Neighbor and neighbor—yes. Gonzales and Caldwell—yes. Lockhart and McMasters—yes. The big trail opening up, the whole country opening up—yes. The Indians giving way before the white men—yes. A new day coming into all this country—why yes! I can see all those things, and so can you. But why? What actuated it all? It seems to me it must have been love—love of man and woman. I know it was my love for you that drove me. There are things we can't ever measure. I couldn't explain what I mean—no. And, of course I know," he added, "I'd have no right to if I could."

Anastasie Lockhart stood looking at him, wide-eyed. Surely—she knew it now with a sudden gasp of apprehension—her instinct had been right. She had loved in him something other than the cold dominancy of

his nature. Now she knew that he was not the coldest man in all the world, but a man of tempestuous heats, with storm and stress about him. For the first time she saw his fingers tremble as he half reached out a hand, withdrew it.

Neither could he now speak, except with effort. It seemed that, after all, they were come to the parting of the roads.

"So you wanted my signature to come back to you under the words 'In full to date.' Is it in full to date? Well, we'll part the better friends for my having come here. And you thought I could not forgive!"

"Yes!" the girl broke out at last. "I thought you were the hardest, coldest, cruelest man in all the world. I have seen only the savage side of you."

His face changed, grew suddenly sad; upon it came the melancholy occasionally so notable on the face of another man of like trade, whom he had met not long before in the North.

"I don't think you can quite understand everything in the world all at once, my dear," said he. "I was set apart from men, because I had taken on work to do. Home and the love of woman could not be for me. I was nothing more than a priest—high priest of law and justice. My hands had to be red. I knew I could never come to you feeling that it was right."

His face was gray, he undertook to smile, bitterly.

"I was a killer!" he exclaimed. "I became that out of duty to my family and my state. I knew what it meant—knew well enough. I couldn't offer you a hand red as mine. I thought a time surely would come

when you'd have a horror come over you, thinking of what I'd done. But I had to go on with my work until it was done. I studied it. I shot away a thousand pounds of lead, I used kegs of powder, in practice. And I studied concentration. That was the only way I could be safe. Of course, I can't make you understand that. But I was playing in a game where I did not dare lose. My life was up all the time and more than my life.'"

Now he was turning away.

"You are going?" said she.

"Yes. The last of the open gang of thieves and outlaws is dead to-day. The roads are open. The state can breathe. The great conspiracy is ended. We've done our work. For those who are to benefit by it, what difference if we do pass unknown and forgotten? Your father's murderer is dead. We did what we had to do. That was what I did— I did that first, before I dared to think of beginning my own life for myself. But——" And now he drew himself up.

She knew that he wanted to indicate to her something. Her eyes rested on the whiteness of his linen. He saw the look.

"Yes," said he, looking at his hands, "I've turned over a leaf. I have thrown away my guns. Never while I live will I put them on again, either here or in the North. I am no longer a hired killer. From where the sun stands now I am done with that. I am McMasters, citizen, not officer."

He had found his bridle reins, but did not go, could not go.

"You were talking about forgiveness," said he, at length, with difficulty. "Forgive you? Why, I have never done anything but that! Of course, since I am going away, I ought to forget you; but I never shall. All you have to do about me is to forget me. There are better men."

The girl flared out at him with some sudden impulse which got beyond her control.

"You come here to preach to me? Is that the way to do? Oh, you ride into my place and you make me tear out my heart with shame and humiliation and show it to you. And then you ride away again and say good-by and tell me to forget! Why did you come here at all? Couldn't you have mailed back my draft?"

He hesitated. His hand dropped to his side. Suddenly he held out to her a little object which so, by accident, he had touched; something which had been in the side pocket of his coat. In appearance it was a fragment of dark red rock, broken irregularly. But Taisie's eyes noticed that to it clung another object—a horse-shoe steel, such as the riders of the outlands were used to carry with a bit of flint so they might be safe for fire in any exigency. Without plan, these two objects now served Dan McMasters for the thing which he had not been able to put into speech.

"Anastasie," said he, "look at this! It's nothing—only a bit of ore I picked up near the Wichitas when I came through. But see, it's magnetic. Look how steel clings to it! You hardly can draw them apart; it will pull to it every little piece of metal. It can't help itself; they can't help themselves.

"Taisie, what's inside of it? I don't know. What is

that force that we can't see? I don't know. I don't know anything. You ask me questions that I can't answer. All I know is that the magnet and the steel come together—here, you see. And yet you ask me why am I here now? I don't know. It's the same reason that made me leave Rudabaugh alive in his camp and ride after you.

"Didn't I tell you there are things we can't weigh or measure? There's something behind the world we can't any of us find out! Why did I come? I don't know."

He tossed the little bit of rock and the clinging steel upon the ground beside the twisted fragment of Anastasie Lockhart's draft, "In full to date." His eyes were softened. The lines of chin and jaw seemed new to her.

"I have been trying to reason things out," said he at last, in a new, strange, shaken voice she never yet had heard. "I am trying now to reason out why I don't get on up and ride on away. We've said good-by. I've reasoned that you couldn't love me. Am I right or wrong?"

Anastasie Lockhart slowly raised her face, her serious, grave eyes looking straight into his.

"You were wrong!" said she. "You have used me like a man. I was a woman."

He stepped toward her, in the open sunlight where any might have seen, caught her face between his two hands and looked into her eyes with his own new eyes.

"You don't mean we could both begin again? You don't mean you could forget what I have been? You don't mean I could ever be good enough for you?

You don't mean you could ever learn to love me in spite of what I was, for sake of what I am going to try to be? Tell me—answer me now, for I don't think I can endure this."

His two hands had fallen on her shoulders, straightened her up, held her at arm's length for just an instant. The innate bravery of the girl aided her to look straight into his eyes in turn.

"You know," she said, smiling slowly. "You must know now."

The tension of the fingers on her shoulders lessened. His voice came almost in a whisper.

"I do know! Why, there is a new world, after all! We are the very first. There is no past."

"Dan!" said she, after a long time. "Dan!"

Her fingers were twisting softly around his wrist, crumpling the white linen that they found there. Her eyes followed her fingers, not daring to look up. Her fingers were warm. He caught her chin in both his hands, though still her fingers clung.

"Taisie," said he, "what fools we've been! Ah, what a blind fool I was! Forgive me!"

"Why, Dan!" she murmured.

Her head fell forward upon his shoulder, drowsily, although it was morning, and though the sun shone all around them, brilliantly, blindingly.

THE END

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